

DRAFT

Chapter Two

Continuity and Change in Rural China's Organization

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What are the essential elements of rural China's organization? Most of the following chapters reveal new forms of organization in the Chinese countryside, including lineage associations and NGOs. This chapter focuses on the core instruments of government power and how these have been organizationally shaped both in the past and present. The chapter's argument is that even though China's rural economy and society have changed dramatically in the past third of a century, the organizational framework of rural China's governance has scarcely changed since the period of Mao Zedong's rule. Thus, to understand how the countryside is officially organized today, it is necessary to comprehend how it was organized under Mao, and then to discern the ways in which the same organizational framework operates today in an altogether different economic context.

Except where otherwise noted, the chapter relies upon the author's interviews with Chinese respondents and visits to Chinese rural areas. Most of the interviews about the socialist period were conducted in Hong Kong during the 1970s with immigrants from rural China at a time when it was not possible for Western researchers to go into China to conduct research. The interviews about rural China in the post-Mao period were conducted during research periods in the Chinese countryside commencing in the 1980s and continuing sporadically into the 2000s.

THE SOCIALIST PAST

Under the system of government established by the Communist Party after it came to power in 1949, China's villages were dominated by a top-down chain of Party rule that reached from Beijing into each and every village. The system operated through a hierarchy of regional and local governments that kept a tight rein on the levels immediately below them: from the central government in Beijing down through the provinces, prefectures, counties, rural townships (which were titled communes during the Maoist period of agricultural collectives), and villages. Within this tiered system the most important sites for organizing and governing the countryside were and are the county governments. Traditionally, going back well over a millennium, the county government was the principal organ for controlling the Chinese countryside, and it remains so today. A county capital, after all, was geographically within striking distance of the villages that lay within the county's borders.

The national Party leadership wanted the levers of Party control to penetrate down through the bureaucracies and the localities, and throughout this tiered hierarchy the Communist Party has stood at the center of organized activity. From the 1950s up to the present day, each level of rural government from the county down to the village was (and still is) headed by a Communist Party committee and its all-important head, the Party secretary. The county government head, rural township (commune) head, and village head each served under the direction of the Party secretary at the same level, and was, as it were, the Party secretary's right-hand man (very very few women held leadership posts). The two men were not the heads of competing systems. The local government head normally served simultaneously as the deputy Party secretary, and this was, in all essential respects, a single system of governance, in which policy initiatives came from within the Party. Mao and the Party leaders under him repeatedly made use of this mechanism to mobilize new political campaigns, to force through new initiatives, and to shake up and reshape the rural economy and society.

Party secretaries were (and still are) appointed by the level of the Party that stood one level higher, and so a county Party secretary was designated by the Party organization of the prefecture. In turn, the county-level Party organization appointed the Party secretary of each rural township, and normally appointed the township head too. Throughout their careers, they all had to keep a careful, alert eye on what higher levels wanted.

County governments

Like governments almost everywhere in the world, China's county governments contained a number of specialist departments: an education department, a public health department, an agriculture department, a public security (police) department, etc. Each of these was linked and partially subordinate to the provincial departments of education, public health, etc., which in turn partially came under the central government ministries of education, public health, et al (Vogel and Barnett 1967). Policy lines and directives flowed down through this chain of specialist bureaucracies. But there existed a dual system of control, of two leaderships (*liangge lingdao* 两个领导) since the county departments simultaneously came under the supervision of the county governments headed by their Party secretaries and Party committees. The influence of the county Party organization over the departments within its jurisdiction was reinforced by the fact that the county Party's Organization Department (that is, its human resources department) was responsible for all of the important appointments of the Party and government employees in the county government, including the county specialist departments. This remains the case today.

Mao distrusted the ministries and their bureaucracies. He apparently felt that they tended to regard orderly administration as a *goal*—"bureaucratized" (*guanliaohua* 官僚化) or "routinized" in Weberian terminology—which in effect would place them in opposition to the continued transformations of the economy and society that Mao so grandly and dogmatically envisioned. Mao and his closest followers instead preferred the Party-dominated region-based (*kuaikuai* 块块) model over the ministerial chains of command (*tiaotiao* 条条) (Unger 1987). As the overseers and coordinators of a whole range of local organizations, regional and county Party committees were far better positioned than ministerial/department bureaucracies to initiate mass mobilization and to manage the upsurge of political campaigns. Relinquishing a comprehensive range of responsibilities to a regional framework meant that a Party committee rather than professional ministry functionaries—the "reds" rather than the "experts"—would establish the priorities and set the tone, would promulgate the local policy decisions and would control and allocate the financing.

The periods when the local county-based system of Party committees were most firmly in control, such as the Great Leap Forward and the first half of the 1970s, were not in any way periods in which the grip of the top leadership in Beijing was relaxed. Quite to the contrary. The official demand during such times was for "monolithic leadership" (*yiyuanhua lingdao* 一元化领导), a term that connoted a more dictatorial political grip over both government bureaus and lower Party committees by Mao and the Party Central Committee in Beijing. In fact, one of the charges that the proponents of

regional Party committee control leveled against the system of ministerial chains of command was that in the latter framework officials were too inclined to ignore the top Party commanders' "monolithic leadership" in pursuit of the ministries' own interests and policies. But each time that the ministries' specialized expertise was ignored in policy-making and implementation, problems ensued, and so to rectify these the system of controls eventually shifted again to re-strengthen the ministries' chains of command. Thus, during the two and a half decades of Mao's rule, county governments oscillated between periods in which the local Party leadership dominated county departments and periods when it shared responsibilities with specialist provincial departments and national ministries at the top of the specialist chain (Unger 1987).

Communes

The commune and its Party secretary were needed as a bridge between the rural communities and the counties. This was because the counties, which comprised the next higher level in the chain of political command, normally contained upward of a hundred villages, far too large a number to be supervised directly by the government organs in the county capital.

Each commune consisted of a small rural market town and a dozen or so surrounding agricultural villages that were close enough to the town to do their marketing there.¹ Under the national government that had preceded Communist rule, this market-town district had been titled a township (*xiang* 乡), and today it again holds that title. In traditional times, the government's formal organization extended only to the county, and the landlord gentry who gathered in the rural market towns informally governed the countryside. Under the Republic in the 1930s and 1940s, rudimentary efforts were made to establish a government presence in the townships, but with limited success (e.g., Duara 1988). With the Communist revolution, the government forcefully extended its direct rule down into the townships and local villages, and the landlord gentry who had controlled rural township affairs were supplanted by a commune (township) Party committee and a fully-staffed commune government.

Most essentially, the commune administration served the role of a political watchdog: the seat of a Party machine that kept a close watch on the villages within its jurisdiction and relayed the state's policies and commands to the village Party Secretaries. The commune government also oversaw offices of the various county departments (police, finance, public health, agricultural extension services, etc.), which came under the dual control of the county and township governments. In addition, the commune administration sometimes owned and operated several small rural factories, established

and ran a local secondary school, sometimes established a rudimentary hospital, and organized flood-control and road-building projects that were bigger than any single village could handle (e.g., Barnett 1967: 313-362).

When acting on its own, without higher-level backing, the commune administration was potentially a weak tier in the party-state's chain of command. To control the villages in its jurisdiction, it had no natural constituencies that its leaders could turn to for support, and the commune administration held few economic assets or financial resources of its own. The commune leadership had to depend upon the borrowed power of the state to boost its authority. But this borrowed power was more than sufficient, as this was a truly powerful state. When the commune leadership sought to enforce its sway over the countryside in order to reshape the local economy and social mores, it could turn successfully to the undisputed strength of the Party levers of top-down control.

Villages

Each large village (or in the absence of sizable villages, each cluster of small neighboring hamlets) was designated a "brigade."² (This term, *dadui* 大队, was devised during the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s, when military-style terminology was in vogue.) The brigade government (that is, the village government) controlled and coordinated the irrigation system that fed into the teams' fields, ran the local primary school and perhaps a rudimentary health clinic, sometimes established and operated small village factories and repair shops—and controlled almost all organized activities within the village, including political campaigns. This was because the brigade was the lowest level at which a Party branch operated. It provided the principal avenue through which the Party leadership in Beijing could penetrate and dominate village life—for the branch Party secretary was empowered to closely supervise the workings of the village government and the village economy. Although each village had a brigade head and deputy brigade heads and other official posts, they were subordinate to the Party branch and its Party Secretary. To make sure the brigade Party Secretary was attuned to the wishes of the Party, he (few Party secretaries were women) was selected by the Party level above.

Production teams

The grass-roots level of rural organization, which was titled a production team (*shengchan dui* 生产队), comprised a hamlet or village neighborhood containing some 10 to 50 households. This group of households collectively owned a block of agricultural land, and its member households worked the

land together as a group and shared in the harvest proceeds. Each member of the team received points based on how much labor he or she contributed and was paid out of the harvest proceeds in a grain allotment and cash, the amount of which depended on his or her points and on the size and value of the crop yields. This system of production-team ownership and labor was initiated in the early 1960s in the wake of the Great Leap Forward's failure. The idea was for agricultural production to rely upon a collective unit small enough for members to perceive the relationship between their own contribution of labor, their team's productivity, and their family's benefits from this.

To encourage farmers to accept their team head's leadership, the head was normally either elected by team members or informally chosen by consensus, though in a minority of cases the team heads were actually selected from above by the Party organization. In some other cases, even if elected, the production team head was chosen by one large kinship group or clique to the detriment of other such groups, and cases were reported of nepotism, favoritism, and abuses of power. But despite such occurrences, on the whole the teams were relatively democratic in the way leaders were chosen (Burns 1988; Chan, Madsen, Unger 2009: 66-71)—which had no parallel in any other parts of the Chinese political system.

Under this system, the attention of the peasantry became focused, more strongly than ever before, upon their own hamlets and villages. The peasantry, after all, no longer were independent smallholders but were bound together economically in the production teams and shared a common harvest with their immediate neighbors. And during the decades of Mao's rule they felt this bind to the team and village especially strongly because they could no longer depart the village to live or work elsewhere. A rigid system of residential permits (*hukou* 户口) had been established in 1960 that prevented people from moving to another district or working away from home without government permission—and this was rigorously enforced.

Despite the farmers' common interest in their team's economic success and the farmers' tight organization under a team leader who represented their interests, the production teams could scarcely resist the political levels above them. Their base, after all, was only a hamlet or a small village neighborhood; their heads quite often were illiterate and lacked the knowledge and confidence to speak up effectively in defense of their teams' interests when faced by articulate, overbearing political superiors; and if a team head did take a stand he could always be dismissed from on high. Whereas the rural economy was based upon the teams, the political reins were firmly held by the village Party secretary and the Party organizations at the village and higher levels.

THE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP'S PRIORITIES

Although Mao and other Party leaders were willing to tolerate a system of ownership and production by relatively small production teams, and were willing for the farmers to select their own production-team heads, at the same time the national leaders were unwilling to give the team memberships leeway in deciding what crops to grow or how their villages were run. The system ultimately was top-down. The belief at the helm of the Party was that China's farmers, left to their own devices, would not continue to move China forward into ever higher forms of socialist society. The farmers and villages needed to be controlled and prodded for their own good. Ideological campaigns were organized, reaching out to the villagers to incorporate them into the belief system of the Party. Through a series of such campaigns and the introduction of study sessions in every village, in which Mao's thought was inculcated as holy writ, the government succeeded in eliciting the farmers' faith in the Party and its Chairman.

There was a particular need to do so. The national leadership was convinced that to develop the national economy, agricultural surpluses needed to be squeezed from the countryside. Without strong institutional mechanisms in place, backed up by ideological appeals, the villagers would not so willingly sacrifice their own material interests by providing the state with cheap agricultural provisions to help build up Chinese industry. Stalin had rapidly expanded Russian industry through this strategy, resorting to brutal force to squeeze out a massive amount of foodstuffs in what essentially was a war against the countryside. In sharp contrast, the Chinese Communist Party managed to extract foodstuffs on its own terms by thoroughly organizing the farmers into teams, brigades/villages, and communes while simultaneously establishing an effective grassroots system of political/ideological outreach.

To ensure this predictable supply of basic foodstuffs to the cities, the state dictated to the production teams which of their fields needed to be allocated to growing grain or other specified crops and precisely how large a quota of grain each team needed to sell to the state at a low price. They were required to ignore comparative advantage and market prices. While many teams sought secretly to cheat somewhat by concealing grain from the state (Oi 1989; Chan and Unger 1982), after the establishment of the system of production teams in the early 1960s the Chinese system needed to rely on surprisingly little outright coercion.

It was a system, though, that contained the seeds of its own ultimate failure, precisely because the higher-level policies so often went against the material interests of the farmers, and because the rural officials in charge of implementing these policies did not bend the policies sufficiently to accommodate the peasants' needs. It was an overly unresponsive and rigid system,

since the higher in the rural administration that an official sat, the more closely he found it personally worthwhile to strictly abide by the Party-state's demands. For one thing, the officials at the commune and county levels, unlike the village-level brigade leadership, were out of sight and out of range of the peasants' economic frustrations. Nor did they feel particularly attached to the rural district where they were stationed. In fact, the commune leaders normally were rotated from one commune to another rather than serve in their own native commune district, just as the county's leaders were rotated in from elsewhere.³ (This was in keeping with the long-standing practices of the Chinese emperors, who had sent officials to rule counties and regions of which they were not natives so as to circumvent the dangers of local loyalties and connections.) Unlike village-level cadres, they were paid by and received their promotions from the state; and if we can intuit from the policies that these county and commune officials sometimes pushed, it would seem that their jobs were not jeopardized by crop failures out in the villages or stagnating peasant living standards, just so long as the grain-quota exactions and Beijing's commands got met.

The system entailed a one-way street in terms of government revenues/expenditures. Money and produce exited the countryside; little was returned. The central, provincial, county and township governments provided little funding for public services in villages. Primary education, medical care, and welfare support for the handicapped and the elderly needy depended upon local "self reliance." Villages were encouraged to pay out of their own scant resources to support so-called "barefoot doctors" and to establish and pay for all of the costs of village primary schools, as well as being responsible for the salaries of the village's Party secretary and officials.

Despite the government's impositions on the villages and the dearth of government expenditures on village welfare, the Party enjoyed a reservoir of popularity and trust in the countryside dating back to the time of the Chinese civil war in the 1930s and 1940s and the land reform of the early 1950s. This was reinforced by the effective program of ideological teachings. But the peasantry's faith could not endlessly be tested, year after exhausting year and decade after decade, in the face of heavy grain exactions and poor rural living standards. By the 1970s peasant patience was beginning to wear thin. But rather than ease up, the government under Mao pushed harder and intervened further in dictating to farmers what the production teams must grow; in sharply cutting back the number of poultry and pigs farmers could privately own; and in forcing on the farmers a whole range of other policies that were inimical to their interests (Zweig 1989; Chan, Madsen, and Unger 2009: Ch. 9). The repeated efforts to bend the grassroots to the will of the radically leftist Maoist leadership often resulted in economic setbacks, and farmers were also irritated by the commandist style of many village leaders, which was in keeping with the broader political atmosphere of Party rule. With

agricultural production and living standards stagnating during much of the 1970s, many farmers became disillusioned. This and the stalled production eventually led to the abandonment of agrarian socialism after Mao's death.

ORGANIZING THE COUNTRYSIDE IN POST-MAO CHINA

A few years after Mao's death, the new national leadership under Deng Xiaoping decided that agriculture would flourish if farm families could independently till the soil and market their own crops. Early in the 1980s the land was distributed to each of a team's households, normally equitably on a *per capita* basis, and each household gained a right to use this land free of charge (Unger 1985).

Symbolically marking an end to the era of a rural collective economy, the titles "commune" and "brigade" were abolished during the first half of the 1980s, replaced by the titles "township" and "administrative village." The production teams, although largely inactive, still exist, but were retitled "villager small groups" (*cunmin xiaozu* 村民小组). While the farmers independently cultivate and profit from the fields they were allotted, the production teams/villager small groups continue to this day to own the agricultural land. Though crop fields are used by the farm families free of charge, in some cases the villager small groups rent out orchards and fish ponds and use the small amount of rental income to support irrigation-system maintenance and the like. But the villager small-group heads have very few functions and almost no power, inasmuch as the households have become independent producers.

Nonetheless, the farmers take seriously their villager small group's continued ownership of the land. In fact, during the three decades since families were initially allotted land in the early 1980s, the great majority of China's villager small groups have carried out crop field redistributions among their member households (Unger 2006). A survey that I helped to devise, which was implemented in 2008 among 476 villager small groups spread across Anhui province, reveals that 95% of the villager small groups had reallocated their fields at least once since 1984 and sometimes periodically (Kong and Unger, 2013). Fully two-thirds of these land redistributions were carried out expressly to adjust for changes in family size, in order to re-equalize land-holdings on a per capita basis. Each time, extra land is given to families that had grown in size through the in-take of brides and births, and land is taken from families that had declined in size through deaths and the departure of daughters into marriage. The survey reveals that the decision to undertake these land reallocations almost always has been made by an assembly of the small-group households, usually requiring a three-quarters approval vote, but

often by unanimous consensus. This system of periodic land reallocations is a coping strategy cooperatively undertaken by Chinese farmers to surmount difficulties in their household economy during the periods in the family cycle when families expand and need land most. In many cases, the families that lose land can expect that when they themselves need extra land at a time when their own family is expanding, they will be able to gain it through a future land redistribution. In the 2008 Anhui survey, 40% (187 out of 475 villager small groups) reported that they redistributed land on a periodic schedule, and in an entirely separate 2008 survey that I helped design, in an Anhui county that benefits from a productive rice-based agriculture, an even higher proportion, 64% (58 out of 91 villager small groups), reported readjusting household landholdings on a periodic schedule.

These land redistributions are somewhat similar in principle to how grain disbursements to families previously had been handled during the time of collective agriculture, and also similar to how production teams during the period of collectives had reassigned small plots (*ziliudi* 自留地) near members' homes on which they grew vegetables for their own consumption. Farmers appreciated this aspect of collective agriculture, and despite the adoption of household farming after Mao's death, they continue to abide by the economic logic and ethical premise of equal per capita access to land and food. They continue to do so even though the central government discouraged the farmers' land reallocations and finally passed a law in 2003 entirely prohibiting the practice. Nevertheless, in the 2008 province-wide survey in Anhui, 85% out of 472 villager small-group heads declared support for continuing to carry out land redistributions.

In other important respects, villagers' attitudes and livelihoods have changed considerably in tune with the new era of household farming and private entrepreneurship. They are largely independent, focused on their families, and often wary of the local governments. For their part, the national and local governments have stopped trying to suppress religious beliefs or to dominate other facets of everyday life. Importantly, too, villagers are no longer tied tightly to the land. Very large numbers of villagers from the younger generations now work most of the year at urban factories, construction sites, and in the service trades, and return to their home village only intermittently.

But despite the vast changes in China's rural economy and in rural society, the framework of the rural governing system has scarcely changed. During the 1980s, the central government in Beijing announced the Party would step back from the day-to-day affairs of regional and local governments: that the Party would be separated from the administrative government (*dang-zheng fenkai* 党政分开). But this initiative was short-lived. The national and regional Party leaders soon realized that they wanted to keep a grip on what occurred locally and that the intertwined shape of a party-state was an effec-

tive mechanism for control. Today the local Party secretary, be it at county, township or village level, remains very much the top leader, and Party committees chaired by the secretary remain the locus of power. The county Party secretary, as the single most powerful figure, normally continues to play a direct local role in setting economic policy. Under him, the county Party's Organization Department continues to make all of the important appointments of county and township government personnel. The main twist is that whereas under Mao the Party-government machinery pushed radical political and social transformation, in the post-Mao period rapid economic development, pure and simple, is the name of the game, and the county leadership is charged with acting in the fashion of a small-scale developmentalist state (Blecher and Shue 1996; Fewsmith, 2011).

A second form of continuity in rural administration lies in the rotations of county and township-level leaders—but notably, not village leaders—to new posts elsewhere (within the same province or prefecture for county leaders, and within the same county for township leaders). The consequences are similar to the rotation of officials in Mao's time: some of the county and township leaders today do not necessarily feel any particular attachment to the populace of the districts they govern.

Another type of continuity involves the shape of the county and township administrative system. At the county level, administration is carried out by a variety of specialist departments within the same administrative framework of dual controls as prevailed under Mao. Also similar to prior times, the township government is divided into a number of offices that correspond to the structure of the county government: a civil affairs office, a public security office, a legal affairs office, a financial office, a Women's Association office, and so forth. In fact, almost all of the county-level bureaus have a counterpart at the township level. Practically all of these township offices come under the dual control of both the township government and the relevant county bureau: for instance, the township's legal officer comes under the joint control of both the township government and the county judicial department.

As has been observed, this system of dual controls was inherited from the Maoist period in what had been an effort to combine central controls with local Party initiative. But whereas Mao had sought periodically to weaken the ministries' chains of command, in the post-Mao era the central government has tried to strike a balance between top-down specialized departments and local Party control. In some ministries the chains-of-command were rebuilt after Mao's death. But for much of the post-Mao period, the higher levels of government have not sufficiently financed the operations of rural education, public healthcare, agricultural extension services, etc., and this paucity of financing had the effect of reducing the influence of higher department levels. The county and township government had to scramble to financially support the various local departments (or in many cases the county and

townships gave free rein to the departments to finance their own operations through user fees). To the extent that higher level financial support was not forthcoming, the local (*kuaikuai* 块块) levels have held sway.

During the post-Mao period from the early 1980s up through the present time, there has often been a tacit question within this system as to how the township and county governments should share influence over the township-level departments. The finance office and the tax office in the townships usually seem to be more securely in the county government's control. Both offices are responsible for collecting revenue, which the county and higher levels of government are intent upon controlling. The agricultural extension services, by comparison, are not of vital interest to county authorities, and the township is able to play a larger role in controlling these township-level offices. Generally speaking, though, the county governments normally are better funded than their townships, and so they usually hold the preponderance of leverage over the bulk of the township-level offices. This is somewhat parallel to the balance of influence over such offices that usually prevailed under Mao (Barnett 1967: 352-361). A significant change, though, is that the post-Mao era has witnessed a marked proliferation in the numbers and types of such offices, as more departments get created at county level and as these establish township-level branches.

LOCAL OFFICIALS AND THE "PEASANTS' BURDEN"

While the framework of Mao-era rural administration has largely remained in place, the context in which it operates has shifted dramatically. One major reason is that the bedrock of the rural economy has been transformed in nature. But a second major consideration is that rural officials are no longer yoked to the ideological demands of a radical leader. In the period of Mao's rule, rural officials were in a position to amass and misuse power, but since the ideology put a premium upon frugality, a relatively luxurious material life would have stood out and would have made them vulnerable to charges of leading a corruptly bourgeois style of life.

The times have now changed. In contrast to the Mao period, getting rich and living well were now being promoted by central policies. A Deng slogan of the 1980s was "Let a portion of the people get rich first" (*Rang yibufen ren xian fuqilai* 让一部分人先富起来). Officials could see private entrepreneurs taking advantage of new commercial opportunities and living quite well, and many rural officials have felt it justifiable that they themselves should have a similar living standard. At the same time, in a departure from previous practices, starting in the early 1980s the central government's more relaxed posture toward rural society was paralleled by a lax approach to rural offi-

cials. Under Mao, anti-corruption political campaigns periodically had been launched to target errant local officials for public exposure and purge. Such campaigns have largely been called off since the early 1980s.⁴ The national government possibly reasoned that by abandoning its major technique for combating corruption, it could buy the rural officials' cooperation for economic reforms, by allowing them to materially benefit from the reforms.

Large numbers of rural officials have taken advantage of this, both as individuals and as a group. Thus, as the central state pulled back and no longer held the local officialdom in check through anti-corruption drives, officials at the county, township, and village levels began to connive to benefit themselves. They erected informal networks of fellow officials stretching up and down across the county, township and village levels, who have scratched each others' backs and covered up for and enriched each other, sometimes blatantly but sometimes through ingenious hidden machinations. Sometimes the efforts to extract money or to gain property are done for personal private gains and sometimes for the enrichment of the county and township bureaucratic units to which the officials belong. The units then provide cars, new up-market housing and other perks to its leading officials. County and township departments began levying all sorts of taxes and user fees to feather their own nests. This usually entailed squeezing the village populace. (Xiong and Yang 2000; Bernstein and Lü 2003; Peng 1996; Ku 1999; Lam 2000; Chen and Wu 2004; Li 2001; Mood 2005; So 2007; Gong 2006). Powerbrokers within the county Party and government machinery began to vie to control the most lucrative county departments (Hillman 2010; Smith 2009).

Sometimes such machinations also were carried out by local governments because they needed additional revenue simply to stay afloat. Such local governments have come under repeated pressure from higher-level authorities to take on additional programs, which the higher level governments declined to fund (Zhao 2007a, 2007b). Facing a revenue crisis, some of these local rural governments have engaged in the same sorts of efforts as corrupt officials to squeeze money from the countryside.

Regardless of whether the money went to enhance the lifestyles of officials or, more legitimately, to keep local governments afloat, farmers felt frustrated about the officials' activities, and resistant to ever higher taxes and fees. In previous times, during the period of collective agriculture, the farmers were not as acutely aware of the exactions by higher levels, since these were extracted from the collective coffers before the farmers received their incomes. Now it was being squeezed from individual households, which have been fully aware of how much was being taken. To pay the taxes and fees, to keep children at school as tuition fees mounted, and to pay for the

ever-rising fees of public medical clinics, many young villagers had to get jobs in urban sweatshop factories as migrant workers simply to sustain their families back home (e.g., Gao, 1998; Unger 2002: Ch. 6).

Much of the personal and institutional corruption in rural governance is facilitated and protected by the primacy of Party control at all levels of rural government. What this has meant, in practice, is that if a county leadership and the officialdom under it engage in misconduct they can operate without checks and indeed under the protection of Party autocracy. In the wake of the aborted reform of the 1980s to separate the Party machine and government administration, the Party secretary and his entourage control almost all of the levers that might have placed a check on corruption. For instance, the Party secretary often holds sway over the county Party's Organization Department, which has the responsibility to appoint and promote all the county administrators who count. In some rural counties the Organization Department unofficially requires applicants for promotion to pay very substantial sums to buy their posts (see Smith 2009: 41-42 for several egregious examples). In these counties, the only officials who can afford to be promoted are those who have amassed an unseemly amount of money in their current positions, and they need to recoup the high cost of their promotion by engaging in vigorous corruption in their new posting. In short, the machinery of Party control in these parts of the countryside encourages and indeed requires appointees to engage in corrupt behavior. Where the apparatus of rural Party rule does go off the rails in this way, there are scant means to correct the situation. Misconduct by Party officials and Party organs is supposed to be investigated and dealt with by an office called the Party Disciplinary Committee, but the county Party secretary effectively controls the county level Party Disciplinary Committee and can deny approval for investigations (e.g., Hillman 2010: 16). Nor is the county judiciary independent, but rather also normally takes its orders from the county Party leadership.

In these circumstances, the networks of officials have sometimes overplayed their hand to the point that violent outbursts erupt. One common scheme is for officials at the county and township levels to connive to remove farmers from valuable land (e.g., Guo 2001; O'Brien and Li 2006; Gong 2006). Often, the officials first decree that stretches of local farmland must be sold at a low price for the inauguration of an "industrial development zone" or some other lucrative undertaking. This land either is then developed by the authorities, who retain all the profits for their own sector of government, while the farmers find themselves dispossessed. Or worse yet, the land is first confiscated with inadequate compensation, then handed over at a low price to semi-private "development companies" that the officials' relatives have established and privately own, and the land is immediately resold at a high profit for use as industrial sites, urban expansion, or mining. According

to China's public security (police) ministry, the expropriation of farmland is the single greatest reason for large-scale protests in China, sometimes resulting in mass violence.

Farmers who in Maoist times lacked protection from the central state today want more of an assertion of central power in order to protect them from such local official abuses. In response, national leaders see sense in being seen as protectors of the farmers. In point of fact, after the abandonment of the collectives had been accomplished in the 1980s with the local officialdom's acquiescence, the central government no longer saw as much need to placate the rural officialdom. As the years passed, the official national news media were allowed to publish exposés about the local officials' impositions upon the peasantry. But the central government has not acted to reform the essential core element of the rural governance system and a root cause of the problems—that is, the unchecked grip of local Party control and the untrammelled primacy of the Party secretary.

THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The central government has reacted instead in several other significant ways. An initial response, taken in the late 1980s, was to seek to ensure the legitimacy of village officials in the eyes of villagers by enabling them to reject corrupt village heads. A law was passed stipulating that village officials should be elected to three-year terms of office through multi-candidate elections. In the period of collective agriculture, grassroots elections had been conducted to select production team heads, and now elections were to be held one level up at the village level.

To issue directives in Beijing is one thing, but to actually carry them through in the provinces and localities is another, and it is not known what proportion of China's villages have experienced genuine elections in which residents get to nominate the candidates. In a great many villages across China the new elections for village officials are dominated by the incumbents or by township administrators who favor the incumbents, and potential rivals for office are not allowed to run on one pretext or another. In many places, rather than allowing genuine direct multi-candidate elections to select the village leaders, the residents are provided with a list, preselected by the power holders, of six or seven approved candidates from among whom five are to be selected to serve as the village's officials. The officials who are chosen then decide how to divide up the leadership posts, under heavy influence from the village Party committee. Thus the residents' influence over the composition of the village government is effectively minimized, as their choice is confined to the essentially negative role of vetoing one or two

disliked candidates. (This is how the elections are currently held, for instance, in Chen Village, Guangdong.) And even where elections are more openly competitive, in some villages the elections are dominated by members of the most numerous lineage group, to the detriment of other families. Moreover, the most important village figure under the Chinese political system today is not the village head but the village Party secretary, who is still insulated from popular opinion. Nonetheless, fair and truly competitive elections for the village government head are held in an unknown number of villages. Overall, the election system has been a small step forward, at least modestly beneficial.⁵

The village elections program did nothing to stem the financial squeeze on the countryside imposed by county and township Party and administrative officials. In the very early 2000s the central government finally reacted to the farmers' outrage about exorbitant local fees and taxes through a rural tax and fee reform that is discussed by Christian Göbel in chapter four (also see Göbel 2010). Under this reform, all of the arbitrary user fees were prohibited and only a single centrally-controlled tax on agriculture was allowed to remain. Called the fees-replaced-by-a-tax (*fei gai shui* 费改税) system, it stipulated a single tax on land that was supposed to bring the average tax burden down below a benchmark of 5% of total household income.⁶ Taxation was recentralized, with each level of government entitled to receive a specified share of the revenues from this single tax: the central and provincial governments would retain specific percentages, the county government a specified percentage, and so too the township and village governments. The reform had a beneficial effect in alleviating what the Chinese press referred to as the "peasants' burden" of exorbitant fees (e.g. Kennedy 2009). The tax and fee reform also forced a reduction in the size of bloated county and township administrations (e.g. Li 2008). But at the same time, the central and provincial governments continued to take more financially out of the countryside than they put in, while practically the full range of costs for necessary rural administration and public services continued to be borne by rural governments, now struggling with reduced revenues. Thus, while the rural tax and fee reform lowered the impositions on village households, by doing so it simultaneously precipitated a crisis in rural government budgets. Many township governments were unable to adequately maintain their functions. Insufficient funds were available to repair school buildings or pay teachers. Too often, the previous crisis in fees and taxes was replaced by a growing crisis in rural services.

The central government reacted again during 2004-2006, this time with a truly effective set of solutions. For the first time in Chinese history, the government committed itself to put more funds into the countryside than it extracted. The new program, which Christian Göbel also discusses in chapter four, was announced as a package in 2006, and bears the misleading title

Building a New Socialist Countryside (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun* 建设社会主义新农村) (misleading because there is nothing socialist about it). The national government has removed the tax on agriculture, has instituted a modest subsidy for grain farmers, has abolished school tuition fees up through year 9 (thereby removing the single greatest financial burden faced by poor rural families), has introduced a subsidized rural healthcare insurance program, has paved local rural roads throughout China, and in a range of other ways has changed the lives of rural residents for the better. Almost all of these changes have been accompanied by considerable amounts of central government financing.⁷ The Chinese government should be wholeheartedly applauded for this reversal of Mao-era and previous post-Mao policies that milked the countryside and gave little in return.

A central question is whether the new set of programs will be undermined and subverted by the predilections of rural officials to divert funding to their own personal and group ends. What is to prevent the networks of Party-led county and township officials from siphoning off a growing share of the new funding emanating from Beijing, as they have with previous programs in recent decades? This is a question, ultimately, of whether the core element of continuity in Chinese rural governance—the primacy of Party control at all levels of rural government, operating under the umbrella of dual controls—continues to operate, and does so without effective oversight or local checks. If the central Chinese leadership intends to pursue effective change in rural China, it will need to cut the Gordian knot. It will need to set up a range of new institutional safeguards and checks against the wayward operations of its own local Party machinery.

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NOTES

1. For an interesting and influential discussion of the economic and administrative necessity for the commune to conform to the contours of the local rural marketing district, see Skinner, 1965.

2. Good village studies on the Mao-era period include Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden 2005; Gao 1999; Li 2009; Madsen 1984; Potter and Potter 1990; Ruf 1998; Siu 1989; Thaxton 2008; Zhang 1998; and Chan, Madsen, and Unger 2009.

3. This rule of avoidance was more strictly adhered to before the eruption of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. In the 1970s, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution turmoil of 1966-1969, the rule of thumb was that someone could initially rise to a top leadership position within his or her own commune, but subsequently would be rotated sideways. This became true, too, of rural county leaderships. This system of rotation is still practiced today, especially at the county level, with much the same consequences.

4. On the nostalgic support by farmers in the 1990s for Mao-era-style anti-corruption political campaigns, see Li 2001.

5. Informative discussions of Chinese village elections include Alpermann 2009, Chan 1998, Kennedy 2009, Manion 2009, O'Brien and Han 2009, Oi and Rozelle 2000, Tan 2009, Yao 2009.

6. One Chinese report noted that the new tax was calculated as 7% of the value of the yields of the fields each household possesses, with villages allowed to levy an additional surcharge of 1.4% to help fund village services (that is, the maximum combined tax to be allowed equaled 8.4% of the total imputed value of the village's crops). The assumption was that most villagers had sources of income beyond just their crop yields, and that the tax was equivalent to about 5% of total income.

7. Other discussions of the Building a New Socialist Countryside program include H. He 2009, X. He 2009, Su 2009: 125-139, Schubert and Ahlers 2010, Thøgersen 2011.