

# The Class System In Rural China: A Case Study

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For the first three decades after the establishment of the People's Republic, class labels strongly influenced the life chances of each and every Chinese. A class label did not refer to a person's current income nor to his or her relationship to the means of production. It did not, in short, denote class membership in the existing socioeconomic structure. Rather, a class label had been affixed to each household in the early 1950s after the revolution's victory, categorizing the family's economic position under the *ancien régime*. During the next thirty years these capsule designations weighed heavily in determining social and political statuses; and nowhere was their impact more strongly felt than in the countryside. This paper explores the political functions served by these class labels in peasant China, the sources of popular support for their use in the 1960s, and the reasons for the system's ultimate disintegration in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Illustrations of how this 'class system' operated shall be drawn from a community called Chen Village, in South China's Guangdong Province. During 1975 to 1976, again in 1978 and most recently in 1982, two dozen emigrants from this village were interviewed in Hong Kong about the recent history of the community, their own lives there, and the lives of neighbours.<sup>1</sup> Most of the quotes and descriptions of the following pages are based on their reconstructions of the period from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, the decade in which 'class' distinctions were most clearly and forcefully felt in Chinese villages.

With a population of slightly more than 1000, Chen Village is somewhat larger than the average community in the region. It contains a single lineage, as do many of the villages in its immediate district. By Guangdong standards its residents are neither rich nor poor. It is not an outstandingly progressive village (Chen Village has never been designated a model for its commune) but neither has the village gained a reputation as politically backward. Interviewees from the village felt that its internal 'class' stratification was typical of the villages in the surrounding district. Based on my reading of the Chinese media, there is no reason to assume that their impression is in any sense misleading for China as a whole.

## The 'Class' Structure in Chen Village

During land reform in 1950, a workteam of cadres sent by the Party had carried out careful investigations to determine how much property each Chen family had owned on the eve of the revolution. The apex of the village's socio-economic pyramid had been occupied by a small number of landlords and rich peasants. Below them was a considerably larger number of middle peasants who owned enough land to be basically self-sufficient. But the bulk of the village population had consisted of tenants who owned only small plots (or no land at all) and landless labourers.<sup>2</sup> All of those at the bottom of the pyramid subsequently were grouped together under a 'poor-peasant' label (see Figure 1).

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<sup>1</sup> These interviews were conducted by Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and myself for the book *Chen Village: The Recent History of a Peasant Community in Mao's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Drs Chan and Madsen have kindly permitted me to use *our* collective interview data for this paper. However, the views and interpretations presented here do not necessarily coincide with those of my colleagues.

<sup>2</sup> For more complete discussions of the class distinctions and labels deriving from land reform (for north China, 1948) see William Hinton, *Fanshen* (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 623–6, 400–10; and C. K. Yang, *A Chinese Village in Early Communist Transition* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1959), p. 141 (for Guangdong, 1950).

During land reform this traditional pyramid was shattered. Economic exploitation was eliminated from Chen Village and the rest of the Chinese countryside. But in the process new socio-political distinctions were created. The pre-revolutionary class designations were stored in dossiers, and eventually a new system of the caste-like rigidity was devised on the basis of these files.

The former poor peasants were placed officially at the top of a new inverted pyramid (see Figure 2), on the grounds that they could be counted upon to support revolutionary change. But the government wanted to broaden its popular appeal beyond this category and eventually granted almost the same privileged status to the former lower-middle peasants (who make up approximately a quarter of Chen Village’s population). Before Liberation, the main source of the lower-middle peasants’ earnings had been their own small landholdings, but they had had to supplement their income by renting additional land or by hiring themselves out as part-time labourers. They, too, had benefited from land reform.

*The class system in rural China*

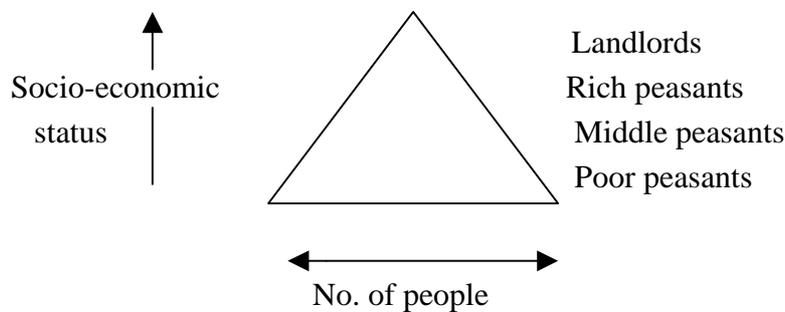


Figure 1 Pre-land reform

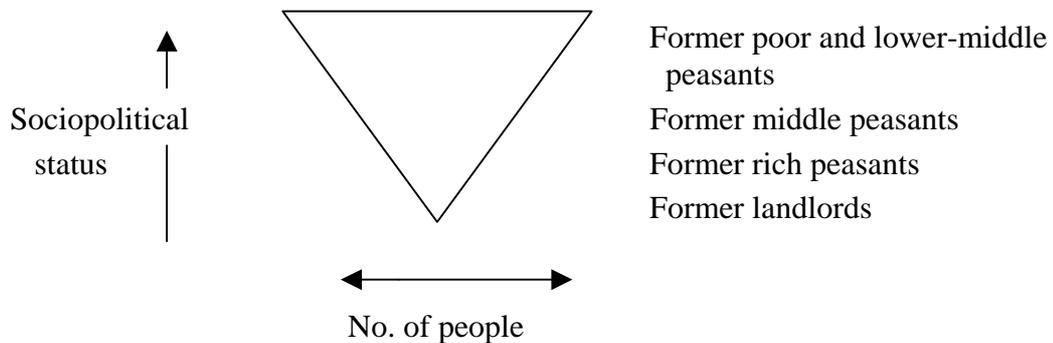


Figure 2 Post-revolution

Together, during the decades to come, they and the former poor peasants were to comprise the village’s ‘good-origin’ (*chengfen haode*) families.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in the mid-1960s the Party reaffirmed and strengthened the lower-middle peasantry’s good-class credentials by establishing a Poor-and-Lower-Middle-Peasants Association in Chen Village. Though a poor-

<sup>3</sup> Families whose heads had served in the revolutionary wars as Party officials or military officers (‘revolutionary cadres’) or whose heads had died in the revolution (‘revolutionary martyrs’) were considered the ‘reddest’ of the rural families. But there were no such households in Chen Village.

peasant label continued to be recognized locally as superior, good-class Chen Villagers thereafter became accustomed to referring to themselves as being of ‘poor-and-lower-middle-peasant’ (*pinxiazhongnong*) status. This term was used as if it denoted a single ‘class’ category. In most respects it did.

Between 80 and 85 per cent of the families in Chen Village belonged to this privileged stratum of former poor-and-lower-middle peasants. Another 10–12 per cent belonged to the middling stratum of former middle and upper-middle peasants.<sup>4</sup>

During and after the land reform, there had been fears in Beijing that the old village elites might informally retain influence over local affairs. This fear had prompted repeated official efforts through the mid-1950s to discredit and isolate the overthrown classes. Landlords were targeted during land reform, and the rich peasants were stripped of their property and residual influence during the organization of cooperatives and collectives. But for reasons explored below, the temporary measures employed against the former village elites became transformed into permanent fixtures of village society. By the mid-1960s, all of the ‘bad-class’ households in Chen Village (4–5 per cent of the village population) had been consigned to an outcaste status.<sup>5</sup>

### The Village Outcastes

A household was bad class when it was headed by a ‘four-bad-categories element’ (*si lei fenzi*), defined as a landlord, rich peasant, counter-revolutionary (none in Chen Village), or ‘rotten element’ (*huai fenzi*). Among these, the true pariahs were the village’s two former landlords: ‘They were treated like lepers. If you greeted them your class stand was considered questionable. They had no friends. They didn’t dare to talk to each other, either.’ The former rich peasantry, though facing stiff discrimination, never suffered this degree of isolation and unremitting contempt.

As the titles connote, the remaining two types of ‘four-bad elements’ (the rotten elements and counter-revolutionaries) were not categories based upon economic class origins. They included people who, even if poor peasants before land reform, had been designated village bullies (*e-ba*) in the employ of the Guomindang or landlords. More significantly, these categories also covered people who had committed serious felonies or political errors after the Party came to power. A good origin peasant thus had to bear in mind that the punishment for a major transgression could be a permanent four-bad-element ‘hat’. The prime example from Chen Village was a former bandit-turned-guerrilla who had been rewarded after Liberation with a petty post in urban government. Caught in an act of theft, he had attacked and injured his supervisor. The offender was officially branded a ‘rotten element’ and sent back to Chen Village to face lifelong discrimination.

As a symbol of polluted status, during the 1960s and 1970s the dozen or so elderly ‘four-bad elements’ (the designation included their wives and widows) had to sweep dung from the village square before mass meetings were held there. To symbolize further that most of them were irredeemably among the damned, they were not permitted to attend any political sessions or participate in Mao Study groups. If a production team was caught

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<sup>4</sup> The upper-middle peasant households were those whose incomes before land reform had derived largely from their own labour, but which had also hired a labourer or rented out modest amounts of land beyond what family members themselves could till.

<sup>5</sup> William L. Parish and Martin K. Whyte, in a survey of sixty-three Guangdong villages, estimated that 73 per cent of the peasantry had been classified as poor-and-lower-middle peasants, 13 per cent as middle peasants, another 3 per cent as upper-middle peasants, 4 per cent as rich peasants and 2 per cent as landlords (*Village and Family in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 99. By these figures, Chen Village has a slightly higher proportion of poor-and-lower-middle peasants and, perhaps, a slightly lower proportion of bad-class households than the average village.

concealing the size of its harvest in order to reduce the government's grain quotas, a four-bad member of the team could expect to be pinned with part of the blame; he or she was deemed to be a corrupting influence on better-class teammates. In most of the various political campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s, bad-class villagers became the targets of struggle sessions, to remind the audience of past exploitation and the persistence of 'bad-class' hostility toward the new order. During the Cleansing of the Class Ranks campaign of 1968–9 (by far the fiercest campaign in Chen Village since land reform), fifteen out of the twenty campaign victims who spent time in the village jail were either 'four-bad elements' or their close relatives.<sup>6</sup> A number were beaten in the highly emotional climate of the struggle sessions.

The poor and lower-middle peasants' suspicions of the 'bad elements' were, if anything, fuelled by this maltreatment. Many of the good-class peasants reasoned that if they themselves had been so miserably treated they would want to seek vengeance. This rationale allowed some villagers to indulge in a hysteria that conveniently reconfirmed and underscored the bad elements' status as 'class enemies':

After a period in which they'd been struggled against, we became very careful when walking in the lanes at night. Who knows? If they couldn't get over the humiliation might they not club you down in the dark? It's a custom in the village at such times to put some fish in the wells, to test whether there's any poison in the drinking water.

The young people from bad-class homes were not themselves 'elements'. The government had never given them political 'hats' placing them under the 'dictatorship' and supervision of the masses. They have always held the various rights of citizenship; they could vote in team elections and attend Mao Study sessions. The official rhetoric consistently has held that these young people, like those from all other class categories, were politically 'educable' and could be 'united with'. Alongside this rhetoric, however, the government implicitly endorsed the argument that world views were hereditary: that the thinking of bad-class children had been dangerously contaminated by their parents. 'Actually', commented a former Chen Village cadre, 'you should be more on guard against the landlord's son. The old landlord himself is already just a useless old stick.' Official discrimination was invited against all bad-class descendants by noting their father's class origin label prominently in their personal dossiers. In keeping with traditional Chinese practices, class origin labels are hereditary only in the patriline, and the sons of the bad-class sons (but not the children of bad-class daughters) bore the stigma in turn. Even had they left Chen Village, the dossiers and labels of the bad-class grandchildren would follow them through life.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the bad-class descendants grew up burdened by confused feelings of inferiority. A rich-peasant grandson from Chen Village, now in his late twenties, recalls that even when he was just a small child,

I didn't quarrel much. People called me 'landlord son' [sic]. I felt inferior hopeless, as if things were beyond my control. It was so unfair. Take me; I was born after the peace [n.b. he does not as most Chinese would, use the word 'Liberation' here]. Even if my parents had done something wrong, exploited other people, why should I be discriminated against? I felt

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<sup>6</sup> Not all of Chen Village's four-bad elements came under attack during campaigns. For example, two rich-peasant brothers from Chen Village were among the men most knowledgeable about agriculture, and they regularly had made this knowledge available to their team's leaders. Moreover, they were industrious workers and went out of their way never to give offence to any of their better-class neighbours. As a result, they were the only members of the four-bad categories whose legal 'hats' had been removed by the village and commune cadres (though they continued to be counted as bad class). In comparison, their mother and the wife of one were quarrelsome. Their 'hats' remained in place, and they were among those 'struggled' against and jailed in the Cleansing of the Class Ranks campaign.

<sup>7</sup> The son of the old guerrilla who had been labelled a rotten element was luckier than the descendants of landlords and rich peasants, since he could legally claim a 'poor peasant' origin—even though an officially tainted one.

inferior, never dared to do anything. Even before I got involved in any quarrel, I'd already say to myself: 'eh, the only thing I can do is to live with my head down' ... Usually at school the teachers treated me like any other kid. But if I did something wrong and got a scolding, they'd bring out my class background: 'You mean you side with your parents rather than the poor-and-lower-middle peasants? !'

Most bad-class young people quietly kept to their own kind. A good-class peasant from another village observed in a 1976 interview:

Ordinarily, the young children of the four-bad elements get together in the evenings. Those of good-class background separately get together. They make up different social sets. The poor-peasant kids don't hate the others, but they're worried to visit with them.

Why did this system of rigid discrimination persist in Chen Village into the 1960s and 1970s? Certainly, the Party's reasoning of the early 1950s no longer held. By the mid-1950s, Party leaders had already concluded, I think correctly so, that the former rural elites were nearly powerless. They no longer controlled any private or lineage properties and had been excluded from the networks of political power which the Party was erecting on the basis of the new cooperatives and collectives. Accordingly, in 1956 the Party leadership's assumption was that the period of class struggle was drawing to a close.<sup>8</sup> Class origins—the younger generation's especially—no longer were to be rigidly taken into account.

This being the case, was the reintroduction of harsh class policies in the 1960s merely in response to the desires and demands of the peasantry? Certainly, in the case of Chen Village in the 1950s, and even into the 1960s, some of the good-class peasants did feel a strong personal hostility toward some of the four-bad elements. As a former Chen Villager, remarks: 'Those old folks really felt it. They'd experienced it. They knew what landlords were like before.'<sup>9</sup> But the perpetuation of class discrimination beyond the fifties had to be rooted in more than just these personal antagonisms. Had revenge been the main spur, discrimination should have faded with the passage of time as memories grew dimmer and new generations emerged. Yet quite the reverse occurred. The stress upon class feelings' and the rituals of class hatred were stronger in the 1960s and 1970s than in the 1950s.

Why? The discrimination against the tiny minority of bad-class people was partly a consequence of renewed state sponsorship. But the Chen Village peasants did cooperate fully. Could it be, then, that discrimination against an outcaste group was in accord with the deepest cultural traditions and attitudes of people in this region?

## Cultural Roots?

Certainly historical antecedents can be found; the practices of any society are necessarily coloured by its traditions. Confucian thought did stress that social stability depended upon a

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<sup>8</sup> For example in 'The Political Report of the Party Central Committee (September 1956) it states: 'Except in a few localities, the feudal landlords have ... been eliminated as a class. The rich peasants are also being eliminated as a class. Landlords and rich peasants who used to exploit the peasants are being reformed; they are making a fresh start in life and becoming people who live by their own work.' (See *Eighth National Congress of the Communist Party of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1956), 1, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Whereas in Chen Village in the 1950s, the phrase 'class enemy' reflected genuine sentiments, there were communities where the peasants had thought no one warranted a 'class enemy' label and where 'class struggle' sessions became an artificial performance acted out to satisfy higher authorities. For example, in the mountain hamlet of one interviewee, 'The only really respected person was a man in his fifties who'd been branded a historical counter-revolutionary, because in the old days he'd negotiated with bandits in the hamlet's behalf and somehow later became connected with them. There was no other four-bad element in our hamlet—the old landlord had lived elsewhere—so during campaigns he'd be dragged down to the commune headquarters for struggle meetings. I remember him being marched away one day, accompanied by representatives from the hamlet to struggle against him and with the hamlet militia to keep him under armed guard. But when he came back later that day everyone slapped him on the back in a friendly way.

hierarchic ordering in human relations. Early Chinese religious thought contained notions of collective retribution through the patrilineage; descendants were often thought to be paying through ill fortune for the transgressions of their parents or grandparents. The premise existed, too, of collective legal guilt. In imperial law, punishments for the most serious crimes sometimes extended to relatives of the perpetrator, even collaterals much removed. These traditional notions of social order and of collective religious and legal guilt were still evident in rural thought during the 1960s. An interviewee who had been a leading member of Chen Village's public security committee turned implicitly to all of these arguments when she justified to me the treatment meted out to the four-bad elements' relatives during the village's Cleansing of Class Ranks campaign of 1968.

In considering these historical legacies, however, the essential point to note is that late-imperial China did not have any strong traditions of caste or estate-like structures (see Chapter 2). The Chinese imperial state drew distinctions among its subjects only at the upper and lower fringes of the social system. Those of the elite who had passed the imperial examinations were exempted from many of the taxes and obligations imposed upon ordinary souls; but these privileges were, in theory, also obtainable by the bright sons of humble parents. At the very bottom of the social system certain pariah groups were permanently banned from taking the examinations. People in this category (such as boat people and entertainers) were often deemed to be unfit even to associate with ordinary Chinese. But these socially degraded groups constituted only a small fraction of 1 per cent of China's total population. Moreover, they were social isolates, outside the fabric of respectable community life; and, as much to the point, their pariah statuses were upheld by imperial dicta rather than by popular sentiment. Thus, with the Yongzheng emperor's emancipatory edicts of 1723–35, all but the culturally and occupationally distinct 'boat people' of South China melted easily into the general populace.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, during recent centuries, against the realities of grinding poverty and limited life chances, it had been a belief of the *laobaixing*, 'the ordinary people', that upward mobility was an intrinsic right, available to those with luck and wits.<sup>11</sup> It was a social myth which helped to legitimize and protect the status quo.

Isolated exceptions existed, such as the hereditary slaves (relatively few in number) maintained as symbols of prestige by wealthy members of powerful lineages.<sup>12</sup> But Chen Village, like most peasant communities, did not share in that practice; it was far too poor. In Chen Village all men were Chens; and, notwithstanding the richer households' economic exploitation of their poor agnates, religious and social beliefs held that all Chens were equal before the common ancestors.<sup>13</sup> The weight of traditional attitudes precluded notions of sharp

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<sup>10</sup> E.g., Ho Ping-ti, *The Ladder of Success in imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), pp. 18–19, 55–6; Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), p. 248; Ch'ü T'ung-tsu, 'Chinese Class Structure and Its Ideology', in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 249, 387; Eugene Anderson, 'The Boat People of South China', *Anthropos*, 65, 1–2 January 1970), p. 253.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Elvin (*op. cit.*, p. 258) shares that perception: 'Chinese rural society in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century was ... one of the most fluid in the world, lacking any of the status and caste restraints which typified late pre-modern Japan or India.'

<sup>12</sup> James L. Watson, 'Chattel Slavery in Chinese Peasant Society: A Comparative Analysis', *Ethnology*, 5, 4 (October 1976) and his 'Transactions in People: The Chinese Market in Slaves, Servants and Heirs', in J. L. Watson, ed., *Asian and African Systems of Slavery* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell; and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

<sup>13</sup> In some villages (though not Chen Village), the internal segmentation of the lineages had an important impact upon 'class struggle'; and this warrants some comments. Prior to the revolution Chen Village's five lineage branches had possessed less land than the central ancestral hall and were relatively weak. Thus lineage ceremonies had centred on the central hall which honoured the most important ancestors? In some Guangdong villages, lineage branches were not only stronger but their members had competed among themselves for power within the lineage. An interviewee from Taishan County, Guangdong, came from a village where each lineage

hereditary distinctions within the village.

In short, the intellectual and emotional support for a new system of hereditary strata did not stem from cultural antecedents in Chen Village. Instead, for a complex set of reasons, the Chen peasants were responding favourably to a new system of beliefs and behavioural norms fostered by the Party.

### Underpinnings of Discrimination: Party Tactics and the Self-Image of the Good Classes

The Party's initiatives of 1950 to dampen the significance of class origins had been relatively shortlived. For one thing, by the early 1960s the top Party leaders apparently feared that the gratitude of former poor and lower-middle peasants was rapidly subsiding. Closely associated with the Chinese concept of gratitude, *bao-en*, are notions of debt and loyalty. In the early sixties, Mao and Party officials felt it was essential to remind the peasantry of this debt. Mao's directive of late 1962—'Never forget class struggle'—was propagated at a time when the nation was just recovering from the terrible economic depression caused by the Great Leap Forward. The peasants were not to judge the government in terms of the present difficulties; through 'class education' they were to bear in mind that life was still better than before land reform.

They were to keep constantly in mind, moreover, that the great divide in China was not between themselves and their leadership but between the masses and 'class enemies' who wanted to destroy the new society. During the Big Four Cleanups campaign in Chen Village (1965–6), the Party pushed this message with greater emotional force than ever before. It portrayed a Manichean world of righteous classes—the agricultural and industrial proletariat led by the Party—pitched in combat against the dark forces represented by the suspect classes.

A new workteam of Party cadres had come into Chen Village to carry out the Four Cleanups. To reinforce the legitimacy and significance of class distinctions, the cadres laboriously reinvestigated the 'class' designations of each household. Repeatedly in meetings, the peasants were urged to recall who had owned precisely how much property before land reform. 'But there purposely were very few changes in class labels', one of the workteam's helpers recalls:

It only involved the different gradations of middle peasants. For example, a landlord can *never* become a rich peasant, can *never* change, even if the land reform had been wrong. A case of a middle peasant could be corrected because it was less 'political' in its implications than that of a bad-class family . . . But [even here] the workteam's assumption was that witless the evidence strongly contradicted the household's 'class' appellation, the land reform's appraisal would continue to be considered correct. The workteam wanted few alterations, because the Party wanted to pursue class struggle.

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branch occupied a different hamlet (and thus had become a different production team). As part of the continuing rivalry between branches, the good-class peasants of each branch/production team were happy to attack the bad-class members of *other* branches/teams. The interviewee mentioned how the political authorities consciously took over this practice for their own purposes: 'During the fighting of the Cultural Revolution the lineage-branch struggles developed into something fierce. The authorities later stepped in and squashed the conflicts by pulling out and struggling against some former landlords. They were only attacked as an excuse, since it was more difficult to punish the poor and lower-middle peasants in all the various lineage branches. You know the saying: "Kill a chicken to alarm the monkeys".'

In most of the countryside, however even in south China, the production teams did not coincide with lineage branch memberships. New loyalties based on the profit-sharing teams replaced old branch identities; and 'class struggle' was not constrained or distorted by any residual branch feelings. In Chen Village, many young men by the early 1970s did not even know to which lineage branch their families had belonged.

Class struggle required that the lines differentiating each category of household be reaffirmed, unchanged and sacrosanct.

As a result of the Four Cleanups, cadres in Chen Village became even harsher in their dealings with the four-bad households. Party officials had learned in the campaign that if they did not always exhibit an ostentatiously firm class stand, they might leave themselves open to attack. As one villager put it, 'Of course they'd prefer to be more on the left than the right. Who'd dare to do anything that might later open them to accusations of having had relationships with bad elements?' Being harsh took on the colouring of political merit.

Villagers who wanted to get ahead politically followed the village cadres' lead. The more activist and righteous a person wanted to seem, the more loudly he or she would harangue the four-bad elements at struggle meetings. It became a contest among ambitious young activists.

But all this does not adequately explain 'class struggle' in Chen Village. For not just the village's cadres and young political activists participated but also, voluntarily, the bulk of the unambitious ordinary peasants. They *believed* in the strict class distinctions and in the legitimacy of class antagonisms. Class struggle, in short, entailed more than what we have described thus far. The Party had provided the good-class peasantry with a complex set of emotional justifications and material reasons for discriminating against the bad-class households. Two concepts drawn from Max Weber's work—specifying two quite different ways in which groups can claim superiority—help to explain the appeal of the Party's messages.

In the Four Cleanups campaign, the cadre workteam had been teaching the poor and lower-middle peasant households that they constituted what Weber has called a 'negatively privileged' status group.<sup>14</sup> These are under-groups, like the Jews and early Christians whose dignity is sustained by the belief that as a group they have a providential mission and a special place before God. The workteam organized public 'remember the bitterness' reminiscences and 'remember the bitterness' meals consisting of wild vegetables and roots. In these ways the peasantry ritually relived the worst deprivations of pre-Liberation times. They were told that their former sufferings (or those of their parents or grandparents) had granted them a superior moral value, with sacred responsibilities. They were the 'revolutionary masses'—the former wretched of the earth who had been entrusted with a mission to usher in a better future for China and the world. As such, they stood in a special, intimate relationship with Chairman Mao, 'China's Saviour'.

These messages of the Mao Study sessions provided the good-class peasants with new feelings of importance and self-pride. But there was a catch involved. To justify their new-found status, their behaviour would have to conform to the Party's ideological image of them. As one young man from Chen Village commented:

When Mao Study was pushed in the 1960s the good-class kids in our village felt a responsibility to be progressive. You know, all those slogans and ideas praising the reliability of the poor and lower-middle peasants.

In this system of beliefs, the pariah classes served an important function as negative emulation models. They represented the mirror image of the good classes' proletarian virtues. The more that the good-class peasantry painted the bad-class households in black colours,<sup>15</sup> the more their own purported 'redness' stood out in contrast.

In addition to the beliefs that they were a Chosen People, Party teachings simultaneously encouraged the good-class peasants to adopt the mythology of what Weber

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<sup>14</sup> H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 190, 276.

<sup>15</sup> Tantamount to a racist slur, interviewees sometimes referred to these households as 'black'.

calls a 'positively privileged status group'. These are groups such as aristocracies, whose claims to superiority lie in 'this world', usually on the basis of a glorious inherited past and an innate superiority of genealogy. The poor and lower-middle peasants had become, within the village, an over-group in 'this world'; in the words of one peasant, 'they feel they're the masters of society'. As a credential of their superiority some even proudly traced the purity of their poor and lower-middle peasant ancestry back four generations to establish a 'blood-line' (*xuetong*) of 'naturally red' pedigree.

Weber points out that such beliefs in inherited superiority usually are employed to justify the monopolization of scarce goods and resources.<sup>16</sup> This was certainly the case in Chen Village. Be it in schooling, medical care, or job opportunities (e.g. an army career), the good-origin villagers could claim priority over their workmates of questionable origin.<sup>17</sup> Remarkd an emigré from the village in 1975: 'Even if you go to Canton from the village to see a doctor, you don't have to stand so long in line; you show them your Poor-and-Lower-Middle-Peasant Association card.'

### Examples of Good-Class Advantages

The 'class line'—a Chinese term meaning privileged access to goods and services on the basis of one's class status—was pushed most strongly in rural China in the years between the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1968 and Mao's death in 1976. But during these years, the application of the class line varied noticeably from one village to the next. The reason was that the class line was brought to bear precisely where local shortages in goods and services were most pronounced. Interviews with former schoolteachers from six Guangdong villages indicate, for instance, that villages which could not provide enough primary-school places enacted a strong class-line admissions policy. This policy gradually weakened as primary schooling expanded, but in these same villages a strong class line in admissions was again applied as the competition to get into local middle schools increased.

In the same fashion, in some villages class-line decisions began to affect even the selection of teachers. In the 1950s, at a time when there was no real contest for middle-school places, many former landlord and rich-peasant families pushed their sons through the educational system as the only means of providing for their futures. Where their services were needed, they became primary-school teachers without any local protest. But as education expanded in the 1960s and early 1970s, large numbers of good-class peasants began to qualify to teach primary school. For the first time, teachers of unsavoury class origins were suspected of spreading bad ideas among their poor and lower-middle peasant pupils. A good class background soon became the indispensable qualification for new teachers. In fact, the incumbent bad-class teachers in some villages were dismissed *en masse* to make room for good-class candidates. But in areas where teacher shortages still existed, a very different perception of the bad-class teachers sometimes prevailed. An interviewee from

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<sup>16</sup> Gerth and Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 190; W. C. Runciman, ed., *Max Weber: Selections in Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 60; Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 306.

<sup>17</sup> There was an important exception here: In Chen Village the class line did *not* extend to wages. The landlord sons earned nearly as much as good-class men of equivalent labour power. In many other villages, however, there was economic discrimination against the bad-class peasantry. A letter to the editor from a Guangdong peasant (*Renmin ribao* (hereafter *RMRB*), 11 December 1978) complained: 'I am a young man born into a landlord family. Both my parents died when I was very young and I was brought up by my brother who is a teacher. When the payments for labour were worked out, we people from an exploiting class background received only 70 per cent of what other commune members were getting. What is the reason for this? The cadre ... said: "Although the upper levels have instructed that you will get the same treatment as others, it must be in a manner suitable to local conditions ... You must receive less, because most of you are good at labour and have savings. If you are paid like the rest of the commune members, this will have a bad effect."''

Canton who had been sent to settle in the countryside was recruited to be a teacher even though his father was a former capitalist:

Nobody cared about that, because they had a shortage of teachers in the village junior middle school. Even after I tried to run off to Hong Kong and got caught, the village leaders still wanted me to go back to teach in the school. They told me, 'Don't worry about that little incident. The poor and lower-middle peasants still trust you.'

In short, the class line could be turned on or off depending on the local needs of the good-class peasantry.

They gained benefits from the class system in other respects as well. The privileged status of good-class men gave them an advantage in acquiring brides. This could be even more important to them than access to schools or jobs.

Peasant bachelors often needed this advantage. There is evidence of a demographic imbalance (with more young men than young women of marriageable age) in certain parts of rural China, including Chen Village, well into the 1970s. (This imbalance may be due to a persistence into the 1950s of the traditional strategy of female infanticide or neglect when food supplies were limited.<sup>18</sup>) In these circumstances, young men were more than willing, if need be, to accept a bride of questionable class heritage. Since the official policy decreed that class labels are passed only through the patriline, these good-class bachelors knew that their children would inherit good credentials irrespective of their mother's origin.

Notwithstanding this, a woman's class status still made some difference to a prospective groom.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, women who married hypergamously did not usually rise very far above their origin. If a poor or lower-middle-class peasant family could not find a satisfactory bride for their son within the circle of good-class households, they normally approached a middle-peasant family. Middle peasants who could not find marriage partners within their own category would look for brides among the bad classes.<sup>20</sup>

Though the shortfall of rural women was only a few percentage points, this was enough to dim very substantially the marriage prospects of the bad-class men. Such men came, after all, from the least marriageable 5 per cent of the rural population. Bad-class parents faced the prospect that none of their sons would be able to marry. This situation, ironically, was the converse of pre-Liberation times, when it was the poor peasants who did not always have the financial wherewithal to see their sons married.<sup>21</sup>

To keep the family line alive, bad-class households began resorting to a special strategy. 'Just about the only way a landlord son can get married', noted a Chen Villager, 'is through a swap with another household . . . Both families sacrifice their daughters to keep the incense burning [i.e. to sustain the male line].' Normally such exchanges were arranged with

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<sup>18</sup> See W. R. Geddes, *Peasant Life in Communist China*, Society for Applied Anthropology, Monograph No. 6, 1963; and Elisabeth Croll, 'Chiang Village: A Household Survey', *China Quarterly*, 72 (December 1977), pp. 7, 9. Croll's demographic survey of a village in the Pearl River delta contains evidence that neglect of female infants persisted into the 1970s. The village population included twenty-five males under the age of nine, but only fourteen females. It is, of course, dangerous to draw conclusions based on such small samples but the evidence is suggestive.

<sup>19</sup> This was especially true for those who had political aspirations. An interviewee observes of one Chen Villager: 'He was a Party member and a cadre. If he married a wife with an unreliable class background, he would have a hard time taking responsibility for any important work, He wouldn't be considered trustworthy, because a wife can change a person.'

<sup>20</sup> The groom's family would be wary, however, of a marriage that linked them to a bad-class family from their own or a nearby community. On their side, a bad-class woman's family knew that if she married near home, the stigma of her origin might continue to haunt her. Thus, whereas good- and middle-peasant brides usually married into households nearby, the bad-class brides from Chen Village tended to marry into families from other counties.

<sup>21</sup> Edwin E. Moise, 'Downward Social Mobility in Pre-Revolutionary China', *Modern China*, 3, 1 (January 1977), pp. 3-30.

other bad-class families. But this was not always the case. One of Chen Village's landlord families traded brides with an impoverished poor-peasant family whose only son was dim-witted and ugly. This exchange of sisters between two categories of despised grooms was practised often enough to warrant a special derogatory title—a 'potato skin/taro root exchange',<sup>22</sup>

### Caught in the Middle: the Middle Peasantry and Sent-Down Urban Youths

The bad-class peasants in Chinese villages comprised only a small proportion of the population. Thus the poor and lower-middle peasants benefited most from their advantages over the upper-middle and middle peasants, who were considerably more numerous than the bad-class elements. The poor and lower-middle peasants usually stood first in line for the most coveted jobs, such as teaching. The middle peasants also lost out in the competition for the most desirable brides; in Chen Village they generally had to pay higher brideprices, to offset their lack of status. Middle peasants could become brigade cadres and even village leaders. But to rise politically, a middle peasant had to be especially capable and exceptionally activist. Success was only likely when there were no good-class competitors of comparable ability. As one villager observed:

Our production team accountant was a politically active upper-middle peasant. Nobody else wanted the job; and this fellow seemed honest; and with so many poor and lower-middle peasants in our team we didn't worry that he would cause trouble—would turn the sky upside down.

The middle peasantry did not really object to the discrimination against the four-bad elements. In fact, many of them shared the common prejudices against the outcaste households. But the middle peasants wanted the class line drawn in a manner that placed them securely in the camp of the 'masses'. They wanted to be treated on terms similar to the good classes. They were wary of periods when the government pushed the rhetoric of class struggle. They knew that when emotions were stirred up against the suspect classes, arguments about 'reliability' could be employed against themselves as well.

Many of the eighteen million youths who came from the cities to settle in China's countryside in the 1960s and 1970s encountered difficulties similar to those which affected the middle peasantry. Like middle peasants, they did not bear the brunt of overt prejudice, but they were frustrated by the wall of class labels.

A contingent of fifty youths from Canton, mostly of middle- and bad-class origins, arrived in Chen Village in 1964. Initially, as outsiders without any fixed niche in the hierarchy of village class statuses, they were simply referred to by the ambiguous label 'students', which did not carry a class connotation. In this way the young people could be used to fill such high-status roles as Mao Study counsellors or cashiers, for which the peasantry themselves did not have the necessary skills. But there were too few opportunities in a small village for the majority of these former students to be upwardly mobile, and as a consequence these young outsiders became intensely competitive among themselves. Seeing this, in 1965 the Four Cleanups workteam in Chen Village followed the Party's new policies on class and granted the most desirable posts to a few of the urban youths who had good class origins. The peasants, following suit, began to view the urban-born youths in terms of their family statuses.

The bad-class families in Chen Village had always been too timid to protest against their own maltreatment; furthermore the middle peasants always had to keep in mind that

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<sup>22</sup> Other interesting examples of how bad-class peasants found marriage partners can be found in Janet Salaff, 'The Emerging Conjugal Relationship in the People's Republic of China', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 35 (1973), pp. 712–13.

they were stuck in the village and might bear the consequences for the rest of their lives if they protested against class-line favouritism. But Chen Village's middle-class youths of urban origin did not face such constraints. Young, unattached, unencumbered by village ties, and highly achievement-oriented, they were exasperated when they discovered that their expectations were being thwarted. By upbringing, they found it difficult to accept a second-class status. Whenever protests have erupted in China against the official distribution of privilege, it is usually people in just such circumstances (quite often middle class) who have been involved (e.g. the Hundred Flowers movement of 1957). During the Cultural Revolution, these urban, middle-class teenagers became the Rebel Red Guards in Chen Village just as middle-class high-school students formed the core of the Rebel Red Guards in China's cities).<sup>23</sup> In the village, the young Rebels attacked the Four Cleanups workteam, the village cadres and an official Red Guard group composed exclusively of good-class youths. Their claim was that their ardent 'devotion to Chairman Mao' proved that they were the true defenders of the revolution, in contrast to the good-class, but 'suppressive', local power-holders.

After the Cultural Revolution of 1966–8, peasant youths from Chen Village graduated from the local junior high school in rapidly growing numbers. To make room for them the sent-down youths of middle-class origin were eased out of whatever posts they still held. They became the victims of the same demographic process which was costing many bad-class teachers their jobs. Since Mao Zedong himself appeared to support a strict class line, these middle-class youths in Chen Village finally despaired of ever being appreciated or successful in China. The fault, appeared to them to lie with the national polity rather than just local 'power-holders'. They had protested from within the political system during the Cultural Revolution, in the name of Mao, but gradually they shifted toward disaffection with the system itself. By 1974 the majority of Chen Village's urban-born Mao Study counsellors and Communist Youth League members had swum to Hong Kong.

### The 1970s: the Erosion of Beliefs in Class

Even though the nationwide favouritism shown to the good-class families had resulted in the disaffection of portions of the middle classes, the more 'Maoist' wing of the Party was willing to pay that price. Among other things, the 'Maoist' wing presumably hoped, in return, to gain stronger support from the good-class peasantry. But in Chen Village and probably most other villages, that support did not materialize. By the mid-1970s, in fact, the Chen peasants' faith in Mao Thought and the Party was dissolving.

This decline in enthusiasm was due in part to the erratic nature of policy changes dictated by central authorities. Repeatedly the peasants heard programmes and leaders fulsomely praised one day only to be condemned the next. Perhaps even more perturbing was the damage being done to Chen Village's economy by inflexible higher-level demands. The village was pressed in Loyalty campaigns to contribute extra grain to the state at sub-normal prices; to 'self-reliantly' grow crops such as wheat and cotton which were woefully unsuited to the climate; to forego vegetable farming and fill in fishponds (both of which had been highly profitable) in order to plant yet more grain. The Chen peasants watched in frustration as their incomes declined from one year to the next.

In such circumstances, they were no longer so willing to accept the roles assigned to them by the Party's class teachings. When the Party bureaucracy demanded that they provide extra Loyalty grain or cut back on private plots, these 'requests' invariably alluded to the innate political nobility of the poor and lower-middle peasants and their mission to achieve a

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<sup>23</sup> Anita Chan, Stanley Rosen and Jonathan Unger, 'Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Guangzhou (Canton)', *China Quarterly*, 83 (Autumn 1980).

higher level of socialism. The peasants did not want that type of nobility; many were becoming increasingly uneasy with the way class teachings were being utilized to justify actions which went against their interests.

Moreover, the younger generation in Chen Village was growing weary of the Party's rhetoric concerning the duty of poor and lower-middle peasants to be grateful for their deliverance from feudal tyranny. They had not themselves experienced the sufferings of the pre-Liberation era. Their concern was whether the Party was accomplishing anything for them in the present, not the past. At the 'recall bitterness sessions' of the mid-1970s:

hearing these stories was, for these youths, like watching an unreal movie. They joked about it, smirked and laughed at the old people telling these tales ... Most of them didn't believe in it. They'd never experienced it personally and felt it couldn't have been *that* bad. They felt people shouldn't always be looking back like that, shouldn't always compare the old and new society, should not use the past to measure the present.

The peasants' patience, young and old alike, was strained yet further when, in the interminable political meetings, ambitious young activists rose to proclaim the depth of their 'class hatred'. In the local view, such declarations had become hypocritical: 'All this talk about class struggle just seemed formalistic', an emigrant observed in 1978. 'If the Party didn't keep rekindling the fire, the peasants wouldn't do it . . . Everyone brought things to do at the meetings, and the women sewed and knitted. They've become numbed.'

One of the central premises for perpetuating class discrimination had been that attitudes are inherited. By the mid-1970s, however many young people were having private doubts on this score, too. How tainted, after all, could the sons, grandsons, and even great-grandsons of the four-bad elements really be? As some of these good-class peasants became sceptical of Party teachings they began to ignore some! of the social barriers that had been imposed against the bad classes. A rich-peasant son commented in 1978: 'In general the younger poor and lower-middle peasants nowadays don't think we should be treated like this, that we should be stepped on like this. Some of them began to talk with us.'

This new attitude toward class discrimination may well have been reinforced by the fact that the benefits to be gained from the class line were no longer substantial. The poor and lower-middle peasants, after all, comprised 80–85 per cent of the village population. At best; the class line had provided them with only a modest edge, and by the late 1970s, even that edge had diminished. To the young people's irritation, the best jobs increasingly were going to the relatives of village leaders; in practice, the 'back door' of cadre privilege had begun displacing the class line. And by the mid-1970s the demographic imbalance between the sexes was receding. Only the weakest, poorest, and least capable of the young men had to worry seriously that they might not be able to find a suitable spouse. With or without the class line, in short, the life of the average good-class peasant would remain basically the same.

It should not, however, be assumed that the system of class discrimination no longer had any supporters in Chen Village. Some members of the older generation still clung to the feelings of the previous decades. But generally the beliefs were eroding. By the mid-1970s increasing numbers of the villagers were willing to see the system of class labels overturned.

### Post-Mao: the Destruction of Class Barriers

Following Mao's death in 1976 his political successors moved to abandon the Party's policies of class discrimination. They evidently were aware that the old system no longer constituted an effective means of appealing to the majority of peasants. But more than this, the new leadership believed China needed a new era of social stability and economic progress, grounded in a new set of political premises. They wanted to end the sense of conflict which 'class struggle' purposely had induced and the growing political disaffection among those who had lost out.

In particular, Party officials wanted to defuse the resentments of China's middle-class constituencies. Their concern here obviously included the middle peasants and the sent-down youths. But above all, the leadership needed to win back the support of the urban intelligentsia and the middle-class technocrats who had been alienated by the intense class policies of the 1960s and 1970s. The success of the Four Modernizations campaign depended upon regaining their confidence.

Thus, for reasons partly tied to a new rural political strategy but partly also to the new drive to modernize China, Beijing made a series of sweeping announcements in late 1978 and 1979. To symbolize an end to class struggle throughout the nation, it was declared that most of China's four-bad elements, including the great majority of the old landlords, had 'remoulded' themselves over the past three decades. Though their class-origin labels would remain in dossiers, the Party central committee directed that their 'hats'—the official stigmata—be permanently removed.<sup>24</sup>

Already weakened, beliefs in the immutability of class labels collapsed in Chen Village in the wake of these pronouncements. Some of the older peasants were displeased initially, but their opposition soon subsided. Much as if rigid discrimination had never existed, the bad-class households eased back into the village's social and political life. For example, within two years one of the production teams elected a former rich peasant to serve as its team head, while a second team elected the son of the ex-guerrilla 'rotten element' to serve as head. Remarkably, interviews in early 1982 revealed that class origins were no longer taken much into account even in marriage decisions. Bad-class youths could now obtain brides on almost equal terms with the young men of good-class backgrounds.

In short, in a period of less than three years, a structure of discrimination based on class labels had simply disappeared, with scarcely a trace remaining. Interviews in 1982 regarding other villages in Guangdong suggest the same rapid disappearance of class distinctions. I would suspect that this pattern has been widespread throughout rural China—for reasons basically similar to those of Chen Village. From Chinese media reports it is clear that in the 1970s much of the Chinese countryside had experienced similar troubles and bureaucratic impositions, with a corresponding erosion of faith in Party policies.

In earlier decades, the men who currently run China had been firm adherents of the rural class policies. The reasons are apparent given the historical circumstances. The Party had been unable to live up to its economic promises of the collectivization 'high tide' and Great Leap Forward; throughout the 1960s and 1970s most of the countryside remained impoverished. In lieu of prosperity, the Party could provide the majority of good-class peasants with marginal advantages (both material and non-material) offered by the class line. These gave the peasants the satisfaction of an honoured status; the belief that they were bearers of a noble mission; and the feeling that they were innately superior to the scapegoats in bad-class households.

When these beliefs, along with their faith in the Party, began crumbling in the 1970s, a new means for appealing to the peasantry became necessary. By the late 1970s, national leaders wagered that peasant loyalties could be retained by introducing new material gratifications which would supplant the earlier symbolic rewards. It was clearly felt that a programme of economic liberalization (with expanded free markets, larger private plots, and better prices for agricultural produce) would bring noticeable improvements in the

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<sup>24</sup> *RMRB*, 30 January 1979, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report China*, 1 February 1979, pp. E17–20. The former landlords and rich peasants who still wore legal 'hats' now numbered only 50,000. Only months earlier, at the end of 1978, there had been more than 4 million such people in the Chinese countryside. See 'Class Status in the Countryside: Changes Over Three Decades', *Beijing Review*, 3 (21 January 1980), p. 14; and Party Central Committee Document, No. 4, 1979, in *Issues and Studies*, September 1979, p. 111.

peasantry's standard of living. Full food bins would render obsolete some of the political functions which the class system had served.

In Chen Village, that is exactly what happened. In 1980 the communities near Hong Kong were allowed to sell food directly to buyers from the colony's booming markets. At the same time, under a new government programme which, in effect, decollectivized agriculture, the fields surrounding Chen Village were parcelled out to individual households to be tended independently—as family enterprises. The peasants quickly reconverted rice paddies into lucrative vegetable plots and commercial fishponds. Incomes rose several fold in just two years. By 1982 a household's success at its private endeavours had become a major source of its status. As an emigrant from Chen Village commented in 1982: 'It's not class origin which counts any more; what counts now is making money.'

However, only a small minority of Chinese villages enjoy access to a high-priced urban market like Hong Kong's. It remains an open question whether, for much of China, the new programme of dividing the land into family holdings will have the desired effect of boosting productivity and living standards over the long term. If not, the Party leadership will be under pressure to devise new means to enlist peasant backing. In the past, the Party had appealed for peasant support by promoting rigid class distinctions and by mobilizing attacks upon 'class enemies'. But it is improbable that leaders will want to turn back to such techniques: for it has become questionable whether such a strategy, in any guise, would work again.