

Remuneration, Ideology, and Personal Interests in a Chinese Village, 1960–1980

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Inefficient and poorly motivated labor has dogged socialist farming from Cuba to Algeria to Russia, in part because the socialist economies have found it difficult to devise rural payment systems that are at once economically viable and ideologically palatable.

In wrestling with this problem China, more than any other socialist country, experimented during the 1960s and 1970s with a wide variety of remuneration schemes. It will be seen here why each of these different wage systems was tried. Attention will center particularly upon what was called the Dazhai system, which comprised an explicit effort to reshape behavior in China's villages toward ends that Mao and his followers deemed morally superior. In the short term, the Dazhai system succeeded in some villages. But the program, by forcing peasants publicly to judge one another's attitudes and work performances, was eventually undermined by growing tensions among the peasantry.

To examine the shifts in attitudes among the peasants, I shall draw upon the experiences of one Chinese village. Located in the southern province of Guangdong, Chen Village contains approximately 250 families, about average in size for its district. It is not particularly well off, but neither is it noticeably poor by the standards of Guangdong. It has never been promoted by the government as a political or economic showcase for other villages to emulate, but neither was it ever considered politically backward. It is simply a village that, by happenstance, became the subject of study by two other sociologists and myself.¹ In Hong Kong, we had become socially acquainted with a few emigrants from Chen Village, and informal conversations had led to interviews, to introductions to former neighbors, and to further interviews. In all, in 1975–76, in 1978, and yet again in 1982, two dozen emigrants from Chen Village, including both peasants and urban-born young people who had settled in the village, shared their personal recollections with us. Of the 2,000-plus pages of interview transcripts that were obtained, almost 200 dealt with Chen Village's experiences with different remuneration systems.²

Cumulatively, the transcripts bring out clearly how each of these systems influenced work incentives, how each affected the ways in which the peasants interacted with each other, and how each system, by altering the perceptions of the villagers, influenced how they would react to the next system to be tried. It became a history of increasingly sophisticated mechanisms that elicited increasingly complex responses from the labor force, a history that culminated, by the mid-1970s, in a disillusioned rejection of the idealistically Maoist Dazhai system. It is a story that clarifies why, in recent years, China has chosen to decollectivize.

This chronicle of Chen Village's experiences with socialist wage schemes begins with the failure of the Great Leap Forward. Because of the Leap, the village had had to re-erect a socialist economic structure beginning from square one.

¹ See Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: The Recent History of a Peasant Community in Mao's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Thanks are due to my fellow authors for permitting me to use collective research data for this chapter.

² Information that I separately gathered from emigrants from four other Guangdong villages suggests significant differences as well as similarities in different villages' reactions to wage systems. An excellent discussion of this, using a survey questionnaire covering sixty-three Guangdong villages, is included in William Parish and Martin K. Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 62–71.

Starting Over: The Trauma of the Great Leap Forward

The Great Leap Forward had been economically catastrophic for Chen Village. In 1958–59, at the height of that confused utopian campaign, direct material incentives in Chen Village had gone by the board. Harvests had been siphoned off into an enormous pot the size of the entire local marketing district of nine villages (grandly dubbed a people's commune). The peasantry had been allowed, free of charge, to eat as much as they wanted in public mess halls, as an advance on future harvests. Peasants sarcastically recall it as the Eat-it-all-up Period: for when disorganized production led to bad harvests in 1959, the public granaries had already been emptied. The Chen Village peasants responded in their own best interests. Had they still obeyed the cadres and gone out to labor in the fields, their yields would have been diverted into that oversized communal pot from which other villages could draw. The Chen Villagers would have expended precious calories without any assurances of adequate returns. A hungry peasant's wisest strategy was to stay at home conserving energy, leaving the village fields untended. The Chen Villagers remained unwilling to put in any effort even when the state subsequently reduced the collective pot to the size of the village. A pot that fed close to a thousand neighbors still provided insufficient incentives to resume *work*.

To rescue rural socialism from the nightmare into which it had fallen, the government in 1961 was obliged to rebuild the agrarian economy from the ground up. A two-pronged program was enacted. As the first prong, each of Chen Village's five neighborhoods was organized into a "production team," to which was granted ownership and control over a fifth of the village's land. Team members were to share among themselves the harvest proceeds from this land. The idea was to create a collective unit small enough for them to perceive the relationship between their own contribution of labor, their team's productivity, and their own family's benefits from it. Indeed, to assure that the peasants would see these connections, each of the five neighborhoods was further divided half a year later to form even smaller teams, each containing some twenty to twenty-five families.

The teams were granted fairly wide decision-making powers. They were allowed to elect their own leadership and to manage most of their own affairs. They held the rights, for example, to determine how wage payments were to be arranged and who in the team would receive more and who less. The party bureaucracy, however, always retained certain Important controls over the teams' plans. To fulfill national plans, it had the right to dictate every year how much acreage each of the Chen Village teams would have to plant in rice rather than in profitable vegetable crops; and it specified annually how much of this rice the teams would have to sell to the state. This system of production teams, the prerogatives granted to them, and the state's exactions of rice quotas have persisted down to the present day.

Household Contracts

A new remuneration system in 1961 comprised the second prong of the state's efforts to end the economic depression. Taking account of the Great Leap Forward's debacle and the peasantry's withdrawal from collective labor, the new incentives program had best be one that did not require much cooperation among households nor much supervision from cadres. Under Liu Shaoqi's direction, the government accordingly gave its blessings to a system called *baochan dao hu*. It literally meant "contracting production to the household." In Chen Village, lots were to be drawn each year and a portion of lowland rice paddy and a portion of hill land parceled out to each family. At the start of the season, the family would be provided with fertilizer and seed and given sole responsibility for planting and weeding its allotted fields. Each plot of land had a

quota attached to it. A certain field carried a quota, say, of 300 pounds of rice, and at harvest time the family would have to hand in that amount of grain in exchange for workpoints, say 300 workpoints. The team would sell most of the harvested grain to the state and would disburse the proceeds, both in money and in kind, to each family in accordance with the numbers of workpoints it had amassed.

Initially, a family was allowed under the household contract system to keep for itself any grain it had harvested above its quota. But after about a year this rule changed. The government wanted to regain greater control over grain supplies. So the grain was to be harvested collectively, and all of it was to go to the team. But to keep the families working hard to produce more, the household and team were to share the proceeds from the team's grain sales in the following way. Quotas were again set for each field, with workpoint penalties imposed now for underquota harvests and a progressive workpoint bonus paid for all surpluses. An extra 150 pounds over the quota would, say, earn a family 200 extra workpoints.³

For the time being, the household contract system was popular. The Chen villagers once more were working productively and eating regularly, and they were thankful. But some families did far better than others. Peasants who were adept at agricultural planning and who had a number of capable teenagers available for labor profited most. They not only were able to earn those progressive bonuses; some of them even bid for extra plots of team land on which to raise vegetables and bid, too, for the special bonuses attached to tending the team's livestock. The household contracts did not particularly serve the interests, however, of families with children who were too young to work, or where the husband was weak or sickly or poor at agricultural planning. Since losses as well as gains were exaggerated due to the system of progressive penalties and rewards, these families were struggling desperately simply to avoid falling short of their quotas. As the depression receded, a constituency in the village was building against the contract system.

This constituency had the support of the state. The authorities had encouraged the contracting to families only as a temporary, marginally socialist expedient. In 1963, once the crisis caused by the Great Leap Forward had eased, very strong "suggestions" began flowing down from Beijing to move back toward a more collective system.

Though it was the poorer households in Chen Village that welcomed the government's demands, even the better-off families went along without any reported grouching. All of the peasants, the labor-strong families included, lived precariously close to the border of economic survival. No matter how strong and capable a particular husband and wife might be, the possibility of an infestation of their own small plots or a broken leg or unexpected illness posed ever-present threats. According to interviewees, these Chen Villagers, like peasants elsewhere, wanted more than just a chance to maximize their incomes; they wanted also to minimize risks.⁴

³ Teams selected their own method for contracting production. Other localities in the same region employed slightly different schemes. On this, see *Southern Daily* (Canton), June 21, 1962, p. 1, translated in *Union Research Service* (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute), vol. 29, p. 323. Also see the party documents from Baoan county, Guangdong, in *Union Research Service*, vol. 27, pp. 115, 124, 137–38, 142, and 151. Even earlier, in the mid 1950s, village cadres in many parts of China surreptitiously had resorted to contracting fields to the households in order to relieve the difficulties of coordinating and supervising collective cultivation. F. W. Crook, "Chinese Communist Agricultural Incentive Systems and the Labor Productive Contracts to the Households, 1956–65," *Asian Survey* 13 (May 1973).

⁴ This type of calculation has tended to be true of peasants the world over: "Living close to the subsistence margin and subject to the vagaries of weather and the claims of outsiders, ... the peasant cultivator seeks to avoid the failure that will ruin him rather than attempting a big, but risky, killing," James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 4.

A major attraction of socialism in the 1950s, interviewees report, had been its promise of greater financial security. A system of collective agriculture provided a peasant with the cushion of sharing in broader economic resources than he could manage on his own.

Task Rates

Under the new remuneration scheme, team members would cultivate the team's fields together and share in the revenues generated. Called *baogong* (contracted work), the new arrangement employed task rates and piece rates to determine how big a slice from the collective pie each peasant earned. It was necessarily a complex program, because of the complexity of crop rotation in China. Unlike work on a factory production line, a peasant often had to complete a fair number of different farm tasks in the course of a day, and entirely different sets of tasks in different seasons.

Some of these tasks were much more highly rewarded than others. In particular, those associated with men were markedly better paid than those associated with women. Men and women normally worked separately. In the dry season, for instance, when dredging the nearby river the men were the ones who dug out the mud from the river bottom while the women hauled it up the river bank and packed it into the dikes. The men were paid for each bucket they filled and the women for each one they toted. It was the women's work that required the greater skill and effort, since the dikes were tricky to ascend under the swaying loads of dredged mud. But over the course of an hour, the men's digging paid almost twice as much as the women's carrying. The village women did not complain, however; they concurred that their own lower status justified lower pay.

Most of the hundreds of chores required the constant supervision of workpoint recorders, who had to jot down precisely how much each peasant accomplished. But in a few of the agricultural seasons ways were found to dispense with the services of these workpoint recorders.⁵ For instance, peasants at harvest time worked in tight-knit squads of a dozen or so members, much as they had done even in traditional times. Without having to break their work rhythm, half of the squad members cut the crop; others would rush the sheaves to a small thresher at the side of the field; two men worked the hand threshing machine; and the two strongest men hustled the loads of grain into the village. Since the pace of the squad members' work was so closely interlinked, workpoints were awarded to the squad as a whole based on the tonnage harvested. In this "group task work" the members would hold a postharvest session to appraise each other's labor contributions and to determine among themselves how to divide up the totality of squad workpoints.

But most of the year the peasants worked for individual task-rate payments. On the whole, they were satisfied with this. But particular problems arose that invited complaints. For one thing, individual task rates necessitated reams of accounts; yet most villagers were illiterate and basically innumerate, and there were too few trustworthy personnel in each team capable of doing the daily accounting. Worse, team members would constantly bicker with the workpoint

⁵ During the postharvest season, the village might engage in road construction, and here each person was given a fixed length of road to dig for a fixed number of workpoints. As the reward for hard work, those who finished fastest were able to leave early to work on their private plots. Or, if there were no public project to finish and little need to push team members to labor efficiently, the strongest workers simply would be designated as grade A and would receive 10 workpoints per day, grade B workers would receive a flat 9 workpoints each day, grade C workers 8 points, and men who were grade D 7 points, irrespective of how much they accomplished. With no monetary incentives to work hard, people would take it easy, resting from the strains of the peak season.

recorders about how many workpoints they deserved, and some also would squabble and jockey each morning to get assigned to tasks that either provided the most workpoints for a day's work or were easy in terms of the workpoints allotted.

More significantly, the task-rate system primarily paid people for quantity, at the expense of quality. During the planting season, for instance, task rates rewarded women (transplanting was women's work) in terms of the numbers of rows of rice seedlings each could transplant in the flooded paddy field. Hurrying to earn more, the women did not always bother to push the seedlings' roots in firmly. Some plants eventually would disengage and float to the surface. The very way the payments were computed encouraged a woman to keep her eyes fixed just on the size of her own slice of the collective pie, not on the productivity and income of the team as a whole. It ultimately led to suboptimal crop yields. Indeed, the task-rate system was less satisfactory in this respect than the household contract system, which had rewarded a peasant family only if it produced higher yields.

Learning from Dazhai

In early 1965 a cadre work team entered Chen Village to push through a campaign variously called the Four Cleanups or the Socialist Education Campaign. This government work team, which stayed for almost two years in the village, was made up of rural officials and a couple of university students. It had come into the village to root out corruption among the local cadres, to revamp the methods of agricultural production, and to regenerate the peasantry's faith in the party and its ideology.⁶ As part of these latter efforts, the Four Cleanups work team introduced to Chen Village in early 1966 the blueprints for a brand-new system of remuneration—the Dazhai system.

Dazhai was a village in the hills of north China that Mao and the party were promoting as the model for rural China. Among its signal achievements, according to the work team, was Dazhai's development of a new mutual-appraisal wage program. Its underlying idea was to structure remuneration in ways that induced people to concentrate their attention upon the gains that would accrue from a larger team pie. Such a proposal was potentially feasible because the teams were, after all, profit-sharing cooperatives. If the team pie expanded, each family's portion would grow; it would gain if its neighbors worked harder. The Dazhai system played to this point. Under Dazhai, the peasants would sit in judgment of each other at periodic team meetings to determine what each peasant's work was worth. Rather than providing direct monetary spurs, the Dazhai system would employ social pressures.

This system of mutual appraisals was supposed to provide built-in quality controls on labor. During the transplanting season, for example, team members would see it in their own interests to commend and reward most highly an effective balance between speed and careful planting. There promised to be other advantages, too. If wages were to be apportioned at periodic appraisal meetings, a team could do without workpoint recorders and complex bookkeeping. It could eliminate the daily wrangling to get better work assignments.

But the Dazhai system was not just supposed to be economically and administratively advantageous. The work team officials spoke of it as ideologically superior, and they denounced task rates as inimical to socialist ideals. The task-rate program, they said, had encouraged a selfish competitive concern to aggrandize one's own interests at the collective's expense. The system had daily corrupted the "proletarian" consciousness of the peasants. The Dazhai system

⁶ For a detailed description, see *Chen Village*, chs. 2 and 3.

would now give them the chance to prove and enhance their moral worth by pursuing the interests of the team as a whole.

The Dazhai method of mutual appraisals was merely one part of a larger package that the work team was introducing into the village. Daily study sessions were inaugurated in which the work team cadres and a group of urban-educated youths who had settled in the village taught Mao's quotes and incessantly impressed upon the peasantry the sanctity and relevance of the quotes. A fervid atmosphere somewhat resembling a religious revivalist movement was whipped up—and put to the services of the new wage system. The rhetoric of the Mao study sessions and of a new village broadcasting system repeatedly intoned: fight personal selfishness, devote yourself to the collective. Villagers were supposed to concern themselves with the collective good even beyond the point where their own interests and the team's interests coincided. The politically moral man or woman was supposed to remain behind to finish up work in the dark even if no one were around to notice it. At the approach of a thunderstorm, a moral person was supposed to collect the team's property first and only then look after his or her own animals and grain.

Paradoxically, even though a peasant was not supposed to be thinking of personal gain, rewards for such selfless attitudes were built directly into the Dazhai wage system. In the mutual appraisals, not just a member's strength and accomplishments were to be evaluated, but also one's orientation toward the collective and one's willingness to spur others on and to serve as a quick pacesetter. In short, the workpoint ratings were supposed to be treated as the community's judgment on each person's moral attainments.

These judgments on wages were intended also to have an ethical import in a separate respect. Under the task rate system the strongest man in a team had been earning almost twice as much as the weakest man. An explicit goal of the Dazhai system was to narrow that gap. There was, again, a certain readiness within the village to pursue this. Many of the peasants, according to interviewees, agreed that the egalitarian leveling of the land reform and of the collectivization period of the 1950s had been justified.⁷ The Dazhai system was presented as a further development of that tradition. It was supposed to reduce inequalities in earnings precisely because attitudes and not just strength would count. The weak man who tried his best would be given credit for it in his pay. The Four Cleanups work team thus particularly could turn for active support to all those villagers who would directly benefit from the Dazhai program: the peasants who were weaker or, more precisely, who came from labor-weak households.

On the other side, whatever their agreement as to the greater morality of the Dazhai system, villagers who foresaw that their household's interests might be damaged generally were hesitant to embark on the new program. As one of the rusticated urban youths recalls, "Many of them thought that the task-rate system really wasn't so good; but since they themselves were good workers they wanted to keep it." Moreover, the new system entailed an untested risk; some of the team heads quietly voiced a concern that it would prove unmanageable and damage yields. They apparently felt that a community such as Chen Village, which was not far above the subsistence level of production, had precious little room for experiments. Had the choice been left in the hands of the teams, it seems doubtful that they would have ventured into the Dazhai system.

But in the midst of the Mao study campaign, no one was willing publicly to raise any self-interested arguments or conservative doubts about a program that so patently seemed

⁷ Even a landlord's son, whose family had lost everything due to the new order, remarked to us that "the good side of socialism is that earnings are more equal so that even the lame and the weak survive."

progressive. There was a particular reluctance to object while the Four Cleanups work team was in charge of village affairs. Only recently the work team had investigated and browbeaten most of the peasant cadres for alleged acts of petty corruption. None now wanted to risk incensing the work team by casting doubts upon its new mission. All ten production teams ended up endorsing the Dazhai experiment without serious public debate.

Operating Dazhai-Style: The First Years

The work team proceeded cautiously, knowing that the Dazhai method would not be easy to run effectively. One of the ten teams—a team which had a very capable leadership and seemed the least divisive internally—was asked to pioneer the program with the work team’s aid. In the time-tested manner of campaigns, this team served as the exemplar for the other nine teams. One of the members of that team recalls, “The team heads and team committees and Mao study counsellors from all the production teams came to observe how our team did it. So did all of the village’s party and Youth League members. That way, when they saw how our team could handle it, they wouldn’t feel that it couldn’t be done.”

The onlookers went away largely convinced. It seems from interviews that most of the villagers wanted to believe in the new system’s efficacy. Since their teams were already committed to the Dazhai program, they hoped it would confirm the promises made in the Mao study sessions. Some of them wanted the opportunity to prove their moral superiority; and all wanted to achieve improved living standards. If this new method could spur better work and higher production, they were willing to give it their best try. The Dazhai system, by its very nature, relied upon such a willingness. As one of the peasants remarks, “In the beginning, *because* folks had trust in the Dazhai system, things went well in our village.”

The success of early workpoint appraisal sessions depended not just on this spirit but also on careful planning. Before each of the appraisal sessions, the team head would gather together several strong, politically activist men to rehearse a smooth start to the session. It would be arranged for a few of them to volunteer from the audience to appraise themselves first, both to break the ice and to impart a proper atmosphere to the meeting. This was important because each person’s appraisal was to start with a self-evaluation, something many peasants felt awkward to attempt in public.

At the main session, one of the prearranged volunteers would rise and deliver a short self-deprecating speech, to the effect that he had been making an attempt to follow the teachings of Chairman Mao, but to tell the truth, on such and such occasions he had not worked hard enough. He thought he deserved only 8.5 workpoints a day. He would try much harder in the future to work selflessly in the masses’ interest.

Such a self-appraisal inevitably involved play-acting. There are a great many formal sessions in China in which people use an official rhetoric to say exactly what they are expected to say. They were now learning in Chen Village how to do so with self-evaluations. But in this initial phase of Chen Village’s experience with the Dazhai system, say interviewees, the rhetoric was also taken seriously by many of the speakers. They did not want to seem hypocritical to themselves and others. Many of them did want to live up to Chairman Mao’s teachings and do better work. When necessary, they did work overtime on their own. Moreover, such team members generally were determined that others should equally live up to their promises. A former Mao study counsellor remarks, “People didn’t dare make hypocritical promises at the meetings, because they’d get criticized if they didn’t indeed do better. In the countryside this was easy to see.”

After a person had presented his or her self-appraisal, other teammates would be asked to add their evaluations. But in those first months “they felt uncomfortable,” recalls one of the villagers. “They’d never before judged other people right to their faces in this way. And besides, they felt that if they dared to speak out bluntly, when their own turn came people might raise lots of opinions about them.” Those willing to speak up were usually the people who were beyond criticism—a few of the best male workers. For someone like that self-effacing activist who had requested 8.5 workpoints, they would offer praise and a suggestion that he receive a full 10 points a day—the top of the wage-point scale. One teammate after another would be called upon to concur.

At these early meetings, recalls an interviewee, not a single peasant in his team dared to request the full 10 workpoints. Almost all had requested less than they deserved and were subsequently upgraded by teammates. But all those who regularly had come late to work, or had lagged behind in their labor, or had missed team meetings came under criticism and saw the disapproval reflected in their workpoint rating.⁸

Every day, moreover, the team leaders and the strongest and most committed of the team members were organized to labor at a faster-than-usual clip that forced others to step up their own pace. Recalls the former Mao study counsellor:

These activists would be working very hard and would be mad others weren’t trying so hard. [When the labor squad had its lunchtime Mao study session] they’d take the lead in speaking up about these things. They wouldn’t mention any names. If you wanted to make a self-confession you decided on your own. But if they’d bring up a problem and you didn’t correct yourself, then later you might get mentioned by name. “How come you aren’t doing it right? We studied about this in the afternoon and you’re still doing a bad job! Do you want your team to have enough to eat or not?” Ha, if you had these activists on the scene, you weren’t going to have any laziness.

In these circumstances, the Chen Village teams did achieve an upward surge in production. The work team had introduced a Green Revolution hybrid rice strain. To grow properly, it required better water control and heavy amounts of fertilizers. New irrigation ditches needed to be dug; the paddy fields needed to be leveled; large quantities of extra compost needed to be collected. Under the Dazhai system, both the quantity and quality of the peasants’ work rose more than enough to meet the new labor demands. The Chen Villagers enjoyed the payoffs: by 1967, rice yields had nearly doubled. These successes boosted peasant morale and helped sustain intact the social pressures necessary for the Dazhai method’s smooth operation.

⁸ The scenario of these initial meetings was not successfully followed in the other four villages in my sample. The principal reason may have been that a Four Cleanups work team had not played a hand in establishing the Dazhai method in these villages, nor organized a Mao study program to give the method the needed ideological underpinnings. In one of these other villages, “even in the very first evaluation meeting the people didn’t really take political performance into consideration. When some did, others said, ‘Are activist attitudes edible?’ People would say, ‘Counting task rates I’ll work my ass off, hut counting time, under this Dazhai stuff, I’ll take the opportunity to have a rest. ... So both systems—task rates and time rates—were used simultaneously in my village without taking attitudes into consideration at all.’”

Martin K. Whyte has gathered descriptions from a number of interviewees from villages that similarly had set up the Dazhai program without the aid of a work team and which, from the start, never got the system to operate properly. “The Tachai Brigade and Incentives for the Peasant,” *Current Scene* 7, 16 (August 15, 1969).

A House Divided Against Itself

The Dazhai program was a double-edged sword, however, whose methods would, over time, cut both ways. On the one side, the system succeeded partly because the teams were communities whose members worried about each other's opinions. On the other side, the Dazhai program's eventual undoing was precisely this: it encouraged the peasants to be too sensitive about their standing among their neighbors.

What created particular problems was the Dazhai system's concentration upon attitudes. Any judgments of a teammate's attitudes necessarily were subjective, in ways that observable and quantifiable criteria like strength or speed were not. This was one respect in which the Dazhai system was much more difficult to manage than that earlier group method of harvest-squad appraisals. Appraisals then had been confined to how much each member had produced; and since a man or woman could not help being weak or elderly, a low income under that earlier system had not impinged directly upon a person's sense of integrity. But now, under Dazhai, much more than just payments for work done had become involved in workpoint appraisals. The judgment on overall performance and attitudes was perceived as a measure of what the community thought of a member as a complete person. A lower appraisal implied a lower status. Indeed, the imprecise standard of attitudes inadvertently became a means to downgrade the ratings of people who were cantankerous and generally disliked. To retain their standing even more than to retain their earnings, such people learned to shed their reserve and to begin arguing vociferously for the workpoint rating they felt they deserved.

To reduce the acrimony, little more than a year after the introduction of the Dazhai system the team heads quietly abandoned attitudes as a criterion for the ratings. They never officially announced it; to follow the right political line, the fiction that good attitudes were being rewarded had to be preserved. The team heads simply steered appraisals toward the actual work accomplished.

Yet the mold had been set. Villagers had become accustomed to viewing the ratings as a measure of their comparative status, and most remained competitively alert to what they and their neighbors received. Many were intent to receive as good or better a rating than teammates they felt were of the same level, and at the same time they tried to prevent those who had been appraised lower than themselves from climbing up.

Within a couple of years, only the most politically devout team members any longer made a self-deprecating little speech or requested undervalued ratings. One interviewee who idealistically insisted on doing so discovered, to her considerable dismay, that two women with whom she was at odds quickly took the opportunity to congratulate her on her honesty, and that bemused teammates declined to speak up to rescue her from her own too-modest rating. The next session she requested exactly what she considered she was worth.

A contrary manner of self-appraisal became increasingly common. Some participants began inflating their own appraisal in the hope that no one else would risk a quarrel by objecting. Rarely, though, did such a stratagem work: some teammate or other would insist upon keeping their own workpoint values higher than yours. Arguments gradually became rife. A wage system that specifically was intended to reinforce cooperation among teammates was becoming the cause of growing contention. The appraisal sessions increasingly were pitching personal interests and egos against the team members' common interests.

The weakest members of a team, the ill, the elderly, and the handicapped, did not tend to be among the most quarrelsome at these sessions. They were embarrassed that they were a burden on the team and avoided making any scenes. Nor was it the strongest and most capable

men who normally argued for better points. Their status was unchallengeable; they felt no need to quibble over a tenth of a workpoint. That comprised, after all, only 1 percent of their earnings, just a few cents per week. A tenth of a workpoint—the likely issue in disputes—only mattered to those concerned with fine distinctions in status. Almost always, agree interviewees, these disputants were about average in their abilities. They felt they were making a real contribution to the team but some of them obviously felt insecure about their status and were jealous to safeguard it.

Interviewees agree, too, that teenagers tended to be a focus of the rating disputes. A teenager's physique and strength could show marked development from one agricultural season to the next, and their ratings therefore required constant re-evaluation. They normally were too embarrassed to speak up in their own behalf; but to their mortification, their mothers often felt no reluctance to pick up the gauntlet for them.

Indeed, almost every interviewee claims that, to a very noticeable degree, women were more argumentative in these appraisal meetings than their husbands. Two reasons were discernible. First, as explained by a young woman from the village, men had much greater opportunity to achieve a genuine status of their own. A majority of the men at one time or another would hold a post at the team or village level, but even the most capable and ambitious women were boxed in as women. The *symbol* of status represented by the workpoint system accordingly became more important to them. Second, being blocked from personal achievements, women more than men saw their social standing in the village as intertwined with that of their family and kin. Hence, they tended more than men to intervene in disputes to support the claims of relatives, thereby prolonging and widening the quarrels.

These difficulties were compounded in 1969 when the commune administration succeeded in forcing re-amalgamations of the very same teams that in 1962 had been divided in half. The new, larger teams would be able to control irrigation better and mechanize more efficiently. But with a doubling of each team's membership, the appraisal meetings became even more unwieldy. There were now twice as many teammates of one's own age and own capability with whom to compete, and more kin in the same team whom one could turn to for support. The government's national push in the late 1960s and early 1970s to combine teams inadvertently was undermining the government's simultaneous efforts to preserve the Dazhai system.

As the appraisal sessions in Chen Village grew more acrimonious, the best and most prestigious workers no longer were so willing to offer their disinterested appraisals. They did not want to risk getting unnecessarily caught up in a feud. The team heads themselves had to step in more regularly as the final arbiters of ratings. They began to dread the sessions.⁹ Team members who received less than they had asked for carried their resentments out into the paddy fields; and the daily work of the cadres was made all the more difficult. The Dazhai method increasingly was generating what the Chinese call "mass/leadership contradictions."

Team cadres took the easy way out—scheduling fewer appraisal meetings. In 1966, when the system was first introduced, the meetings had been held every two weeks. According to

⁹ An emigrant from another village recalls a somewhat different scenario. In that village the peasants feared getting on the wrong side of the team cadres and their families; and the team officers eventually controlled the sessions for their own benefits: "At the early sessions, the most difficult to appraise was the team head's wife. She was lazy but had the nerve to get up and say she ought to be considered top grade. For a whole hour, there was silence; no one stood up to support her, no one to oppose her. And the team head himself wouldn't step up and say anything once she'd made such claims. Eventually she got awarded a high rating. ... My main complaints with Dazhai were that the cadres were better able to take advantage of it than task rates, and that with Dazhai there was the feeling that if someone didn't work hard yet finagled high workpoints, then I won't work hard either."

government suggestions, once the system was successfully established fewer meetings would be needed; but Chen Village's cadres pushed for fewer sessions than the government could ever have expected. By 1971, the appraisal meetings were being convened only once every half year (at the very least, grain and cash had to be distributed after each of the two harvests).

But this avoidance of sessions only heightened the tensions when the peasants met. A half year's face was now at stake. Moreover, even the miniscule difference of a tenth of a workpoint per day now counted for something in monetary terms. Peasants who earlier had stayed out of the arguments found it worthwhile to expend that extra half hour at a meeting angling for a better rating. The sessions were becoming impossible to keep under control. Whereas the initial appraisal meetings of 1966 and 1967 had taken a couple of hours to settle, by 1970 the meetings frequently were lasting till dawn—and sometimes had to be resumed the next evening and occasionally even a third and fourth night. Each time the teams were left physically exhausted and internally divided.

By 1971 the team heads had concluded that the solution lay in simply giving each team member exactly the same rating as in the previous meeting. It seemed far better to have a brief meeting without appraisals than to endure the interminable arguments and subsequent backbiting. But by unofficially converting the Dazhai system into a simple system of fixed salaries, the team heads were now granting people workpoints regardless of their work performance.¹⁰

The Dazhai program had entered a final phase in its decline. Up to now, whatever the terrible quarrelling at appraisal sessions, the Dazhai method had operated reasonably well out in the fields. Teammates had continued to pressure each other into hard work. Some had been motivated by the prospects of higher yields and improved living standards all-round. Others, less public spirited, had been angling to prove themselves better than their rivals. Yet others had been spurred by their fear of scrutiny and criticism. But the Dazhai system itself had now altered. Having evolved into fixed wages, even the incentives to compete for a higher status rating had been removed. Just as troubling, as far as the best workers were concerned, there no longer was even a fair spread in workpoints between the best and worst laborers.

Through the years, a group dynamic had been at work in the appraisal sessions. Whenever quarrels had arisen between workers of equivalent abilities, the teams had found that these could be resolved most conveniently by lifting the workpoint rating of the lower disputant to the same level as the higher, rather than infuriate the higher by lowering his or her points a notch. These inflationary compromises resulted eventually in a very narrow workpoint spread between the best and the worst, but any across-the-board attempt to widen the wage gap would have encountered the hostility of the many households that had benefited. The teams could not afford any additional divisiveness, and so cadres ignored the problem. In 1969, when a new cadre work team stayed briefly in Chen Village, it expressed concern that the workpoint gap no longer provided equitable economic incentives, and the team heads concurred. But when the work team left, not one of the teams tampered with the narrow spread.

Just how narrow can be seen in the following figures. At the initial 1966 appraisal meetings, the men's apportionments in one particular team had ranged from a low of 7.3 points to a high of 10, and the women's from a low of 5 points to a high of 7.5. By the early 1970s, the

¹⁰ At a different village in my sample, the team leaders went a step further. They not only instituted a flat time wage; they entirely abandoned workpoint differentials and thereby removed the divisive associations between workpoints and status. "The highest—and the lowest—for a man was 10 points. All the women earned 9 points." Question: Why were there no differences at all in the wages of the men? "Because that would create conflicts."

best still received 10, but the average man was getting 9.5 and the weakest 9.¹¹ The best male worker was now earning only a slim 5 percent more than the team's average and only 10 percent more than his least capable and energetic neighbor. The spread among the women had become even narrower, from a high of 7.5 points to a low of 7.1.¹²

When production annually had been expanding, the strongest peasants had not particularly minded that their less productive neighbors were obtaining a disproportionate share through this gradual narrowing of workpoint differences. Since their own family was living better than ever before, they felt they could afford a measure of altruism: "They didn't want to hurt other people, so they felt 'Well, it doesn't really matter.'" But by about 1970, the village's economy started souring.

Over the years the Green Revolution grain hybrids had been growing less resistant to blight, and the state was not providing substitute hybrids of any quality. But a more potent factor in the village's economic troubles was, simply and purely, the heavy hand of China's bureaucracy. The national, provincial, and county bureaucrats, having recently been pummelled in the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, seemed concerned primarily with their own political skins, and in the uncertain political winds of the early 1970s they were pushing any policy that seemed safely leftist. They were pressing the village in loyalty campaigns to contribute extra grain to the state at below-normal prices; to "self-reliantly" grow crops such as wheat and cotton that were woefully unsuited to the climate; to forgo profitable team vegetable plots and to fill up money-making fish ponds in order to plant yet more grain; and then, as national slogans and policies periodically flip-flopped, to re-excavate fish ponds and "diversify."¹³ The Chen Village peasants frustratedly watched the value of their workpoints decline from one year to the next. This decline can be measured through a year-by-year accounting of what the best male workers from one of the village's richer teams could earn in a day's work on the team's fields (see table 5.1).

The stronger team members, finding themselves with a shrunken portion of an annually shrinking pie, began to feel that neighbors who contributed less to team output were unjustly benefiting at their expense. Some of them began to slacken in their work and to recoup their declining earnings by putting more energy into their private plots. As increasing numbers of the

¹¹ The elderly, semi-retired men who did odd chores for the team received 8.5 points, while the old women who had not yet retired were given 6.

¹² During the harvest seasons, when the teams were very short of labor, the men's top rating temporarily was set at 15 workpoints and the top women's at 12, to take account of the longer and tougher workdays. But the wage spread among the men and, separately, among the women remained as narrow as during the regular seasons.

It is evident in the figures presented in the main text that the lowest rating ever given to a man was higher than the highest rating allowed for a woman. The traditional view that defined all men's work as *ipso facto* superior to women's work had persisted. But in about 1968–69, this came under challenge. Some of the young women from Canton who had settled in Chen Village began agitating for better ratings for women and were able to convince some of the strong young unmarried women to join in. Recalls a young man:

At that time other communes were talking about "equal work, equal pay" for both men and women, so the young women settlers felt they could begin talking about it in Chen Village. A woman of 7.5 workpoints actually might work better than a man of 9; but the problem was that the women couldn't plough. This was the weak men's last resort. Ploughing had always been a man's job, and it was an important job. There were two women in my team who could plough pretty well on their private plots, but the men would never ask a woman to do any ploughing when allocating labor.

As a group, the men of Chen Village were adamant: 7.5 remained the women's maximum.

¹³ See *Chen Village*, ch. 9.

best laborers stopped serving as pacesetters, the pressures upon the others to keep up were relaxed. Ultimately whole teams began to slough off. The influence of the peer group milieu had swung almost 180 degrees. Before, even lazy members had had to work well lest they be accused of taking advantage of all their neighbors' hard work. Now, conversely, people were shunning hard work for fear of being taken advantage of.

Table 5.1

Daily Workpoints Earned by Best Male Workers, 1964–1977 (in yuan)

Year	Workpoints	Year	Workpoints
1964	0.50	1971	1.00*
1965	0.80	1972	0.90
1966	0.90	1973	0.80
1967	1.00	1974	0.80
1968	1.15	1975	0.45**
1969	1.10	1976	0.80
1970	1.00	1977	0.70

Notes: *In 1971, Chen village's richest team could provide its best workers a daily pay of about 1.10 yuan, while the poorest team could offer only some .60—70 yuan, a difference greater than the difference in earnings between the highest- and lowest-paid members of the same team.

**1975 was a year of very adverse weather, It was the third wettest in the 130-year history of Hong Kong, less than 100 miles away, and the winter was Hong Kong's coldest on record.

The Dazhai system was malfunctioning in villages throughout China. For once, the party leadership in Beijing grew concerned. Hints appeared in the government press as early as 1971–72 that, if need be, teams should abandon the remnants of their Dazhai effort and revert to task rates. Many of the team cadres in Chen Village would have liked to comply. But they were reluctant to go out on a limb. Until recently, task-rate systems had been condemned in the mass media for encouraging selfishness and “petty-bourgeois thinking.” More than mere hints would be required now to dispel the team cadres' fear of plunging into a dangerous political blunder.

Higher levels in Guangdong provided them in 1973 with an “emperor's clothes” solution. A new slogan was announced: “Repudiate Liu Shaoqi's task rates; permit Mao Zedong's task rates.” So far as the Chen villagers could see, the two systems seemed entirely similar; but the verbal legerdemain made it safer to revert.¹⁴

Under the Dazhai system of face-to-face appraisals, the stronger workers had felt embarrassed to recommend sharply reduced earnings for weaker friends. Under task rates, however, everyone would simply be paid in accordance with what they produced. There would be no need ever to confront neighbors directly and personally in any meetings. The weak would be able to blame not neighbors' appraisals but only their own slow labor for their low incomes.

¹⁴ In a village in a different region of Guangdong, according to an emigrant, a different political ploy was offered: “When Lin Biao fell, this so-called Dazhai system was said to have been distorted by him, as an example of his empty-headed politics. They began talking about adopting the correct policy of ‘to each according to his work.’” That village returned to the task-rate structure in 1972.

Task rates, in short, provided an effective means to widen the earnings gap between the stronger families and the weaker

The team memberships accordingly were divided on the issue of Dazhai versus task rates. An interviewee recalls,

Our labor squad's head is strong and so's his wife, So they wanted to revert to task rates. But the squad head's elder brother is lame and his wife is near blind, and they *hated* task rates. So right among those relatives, you found a "contradiction," one wanting to go back to task rates and the other strongly opposed.

A couple of the village leaders and a number of the rusticated urban youths sided with the weaker and the poorer. But almost all the team heads threw their weight toward task rates. It would bring an end to their unhappy need to badger team members into doing their work. One after another in the summer of 1973, the team heads steered their teams back into task-rate programs.

Task Rates and Contracting Revisited

Even though task-rate payments again were structured exactly as under "Liu Shaoqi's task rates," in one respect the revived system now did operate differently. In the mid-1960s, before Dazhai, few ordinary peasants would have bawled out a teammate who did sloppy work, for traditionally to cause someone to lose face had been a breach of etiquette. But under Dazhai, a "social contract" had been erected. Under its ground rules, anyone overly careless could be loudly reprimanded. This Dazhai norm now carried over into the revived task-rate system's operations: "Nowadays [1975], if folks get caught transplanting the seedlings too carelessly, just so as to get more planted in a hurry, other folks would tell them off." The concern about "face" had been turned on its head: whereas earlier the norms involving face had protected careless workers from being criticized, the threat of public embarrassment now helped keep potential offenders in line. But even with this, the renewed system all but invited shortcuts. Interviewees report that when task rates again became the basis for rewards, the quality of work worsened.

Moreover, even the revival of task rates in 1973 did not result in appreciably harder work. With agricultural profits declining, most peasants still were finding it to their individual advantage to put more of their energies into their higher-paying private endeavors. Indeed, the task-rate system gave them greater opportunities than the Dazhai system to take off early from work to do so.

A great many of China's villages, by the accounts of China's official news media, were caught similarly in agricultural slumps. Large numbers of these villages apparently were facing considerably greater problems than Chen Village. The party Central Committee in Beijing reacted in the late 1970s. Mao had died; the radical Gang of Four had fallen shortly thereafter; and the new leadership, once entrenched in power, felt willing to countenance a markedly further retreat from the Dazhai system. If under task rates China's peasants were not working hard enough or effectively enough, or were not caring enough about the quality of their work, then the teams ought to revert to a system that tied payments even more directly to the productivity of each person's labor. It was now felt that perhaps the very size of the teams (that large pool of some fifteen to fifty households) inhibited peasants from seeing clearly enough the connections between their own work contribution and their returns from the collective productivity. The

national leadership decided that the solution would be to encourage teams to decentralize and to hand over decision making and the sharing of profits to smaller labor groupings.

The new directives came down through the Guangdong provincial party in early 1979.¹⁵ In compliance, the Chen Village teams organized small labor squads of “several families,” which negotiated quotas with the team leaders, planted and tended the fields, and divided among themselves the quota payments and the bonuses for surplus production. Within another year, again under official urgings, Chen Village shifted to individual household contracts, paralleling the contract system of the early 1960s. Indeed, production was allowed to decentralize to the point that even harvesting was entrusted to family hands. Beyond a quota of grain that had to be sold to the state, households were to be allowed to keep or sell privately all the crops they grew. To encourage them to improve soil quality, it was even tacitly agreed by 1982 that fields would remain in the same family’s care fairly permanently.

Emigrants from Chen Village relate that almost all of the peasantry approve of the new system. The recent bad experiences with collective agriculture—the failings of the Dazhai system, the party officialdom’s blundering economic demands of the 1970s, and the persistent slide in workpoint values—had soured most of them on collective production. As much to the point, to work independent small holdings no longer seemed so precarious a venture to Chen villagers. Earlier, in 1961–63, when they had been living close to the margins of economic survival, the risks entailed in the household contract system had worried them. But now new economic connections with Hong Kong were being cemented which sharply reduced their risks. In early 1980 the government announced that all of the villages in the county would be allowed to sell their agricultural produce directly to Hong Kong. The door had been opened to very high and relatively secure profits in vegetable truck farming. Whereas some of the peasantry elsewhere in China may have felt wary about risking a system of contracted fields, few Chen Village peasants any longer saw reasons to object.

Conclusions

Chen Village, in a period of two decades, had swung from a household contract system to the Maoist experiment of Dazhai appraisals and then, like a pendulum that has mounted the crest of its arc, had fallen back by degrees to the opposite crest of the arc and a revived program of contracts. By 1981, agricultural production, though not land ownership, had been largely transferred into private hands in the village.

What should we make of this long swing into the Dazhai system and back?

It is clear, for one thing, that in Chen Village there was a pattern to these shifts. The household contracts of the early 1960s, the subsequent system of task rates, the Dazhai method, and the reverse shifts were all introduced partly as solutions to the problems that had emerged in the immediately preceding programs of remuneration.

What we witnessed, however, was not simply an evolving sequence of local problems and local responses. Intervening was a complex interplay between state and collective. Each new program was “suggested” by the state. This intervention was based partly upon the state’s general awareness of the problems faced in China’s collectives, but sometimes, as with the Dazhai system, it was based also upon the party leadership’s ideological commitment. Once a program was introduced, the teams did possess some leeway in modifying each remuneration system as they wanted, but they always had to keep an eye fixed on party policies to make sure

¹⁵ Canton Radio, January 21, 1979, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service: China Daily Report*, January 24, 1979, p. HI.

they were operating within the parameters of what was politically permissible. For instance, the Chen Village teams were able to alter the shape of the Dazhai program several times as stopgap remedies to local difficulties, but they had to stick with an ostensibly Dazhai-type framework until new upper-level suggestions let them pull free in 1973.

It was observed that in Chen Village the Dazhai program operated reasonably well in the rice fields (if not in appraisal sessions) until about 1971—and within just another two years the village was allowed to abandon the Dazhai scheme. But that had not been the experience of many other communities (including several in my small sample of other Guangdong villages). Caught from the start with a Dazhai system they could not handle successfully, they still had to make the pretence of an effort, at a considerable cost to agricultural productivity.

In this respect, despite all the problems it faced, Chen Village was among the more fortunate villages. In fact, its experiences with the Dazhai system were considerably better than any of the other villages that I know about through interviews. A Four Cleanups cadre work team carefully had laid the groundwork in Chen Village for the Dazhai experiment; the new system had been willingly accepted by many of the villagers; and their faith was rewarded for several years with rapidly rising living standards. Chen Village accorded us a glimpse of a community grappling, initially with success, to operate almost solely on the basis of collective interests.

This being the case, what do Chen Village's experiences say about a production team as a "community," or about its members' capacity to cooperate for collective goals?

It was observed, for a start, that the Chen Villagers, though always concerned for their own family interests, were not exclusively so. They understood that concerted efforts to raise agricultural productivity would raise living standards all around. And most of them even were willing to support the Dazhai method's more egalitarian apportionment of wages—just so long as the increased welfare of their less capable neighbors was not ultimately at their own family's expense.

The difficulty was to reconcile the family's and the community's interests. Here, the production teams always faced the "free rider" problem. Not all of one's neighbors could be expected to put collective goals on a par with their own more narrow interests; and thus, not all of them necessarily would contribute their fair share of work. That being so, who but a fool would exhaust himself laboring hard in behalf of such "free riding" neighbors?

The Dazhai experiment promised answers to this conundrum. As observed, it was introduced into Chen Village in the midst of a major Mao study campaign. With Mao's sacred thought preaching the higher morality of the collective road to prosperity, shirkers under Dazhai risked being tagged as politically and morally backward. Pressures could effectively be brought to bear on this point, for the peasants' private concerns had always been of two types. While concerned with their own economic well-being, many team members were equally concerned about their standing in the community. In the mutual-appraisal sessions, this desire for a better status could be employed to counter the tugs both of laziness and of personal short-term interests.

There were dilemmas here, however. To ensure conformity, the Dazhai system could play upon the strength of community sanctions—but only by exacerbating the small-minded anxieties to retain "face" traditionally common to an in-grown village milieu. In the end, as has been seen, the Dazhai wage program bent and broke under tensions partly of its own making. When the heightened competitive desires among neighbors to defend their status resulted, at one and the same time, in an erosion of team morale and an inordinately narrow wage gap, the strongest and most respected workers began to consider themselves the victims of free riders. As

has been observed, when they opted to spend more of their time and energy on their private plots, the Dazhai system of work incentives and community sanctions collapsed from within.

Ultimately, in that long reverse swing of the pendulum away from the Dazhai system, the household contract system resolved the same problems of controlling free riders that the Dazhai method had tackled—but from the opposite extreme. Household contracts eliminated the difficulties associated with collective cooperation by, quite simply, terminating collective cooperation.

By pushing for collective goals by way of instigating a contest among team members to preserve “face,” the Maoist Dazhai program had frayed the very social fabric it sought to strengthen. In Chen Village, it had left in its wake a diminished faith in collective solutions—indeed a willingness among the peasantry to dismantle the collective organization altogether. The failed Maoist dream has bequeathed an ironic legacy.